

Article

# What We Do and What Is Done to Us: Teaching Art as Culture

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Received: 4 February 2019; Accepted: 27 February 2019; Published: 5 March 2019



**Abstract:** Carl Andre's opposition between an activating art and a pacifying culture becomes the impetus for wider reflections on artistic autonomy and agency with special reference to how fine art is taught at college. I propose that artistic agency might better be accounted for and enacted by conceiving of it not as something set against or at a distance from culture in general, but 'as' culture. Through an overview of various institutional and discursive accounts of artistic production which describe the ways in which art is itself influenced and determined by external factors, and an extended analysis of Raymond Williams theory of culture as 'collective advance', I propose that fine art education needs to confront the question of contemporary art's wider cultural embeddedness, and the political culture of art itself—a politics based in the nature of the social relationships art practice engenders.

**Keywords:** contemporary art; culture; art education; Raymond Williams; Carl Andre; autonomy of art; artistic agency

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I am not interested in culture at all. Once a work of art has gotten into the culture, it's dead as far as I'm concerned. I think there is a difference between art and culture. Or as the sage once said, 'Art is what we do; culture is what is done to us'.

—(Andre [1969] 2004)

The working-out of the idea of culture is a slow reach again for control.

—(Williams [1961] 1965)

## 1. Introduction

The study of fine art has long been viewed in terms of a commitment to a practice not governed, in essence, by external requirements—commercial, traditional, governmental, or anything else. Art, it is said, must be 'free', autonomous, determined only by its own laws, 'laws' which might best be understood as diffuse and shifting logics which appear through the struggle of practice, continuously reset as a result of ongoing advances made by the community of artists themselves, alongside the critical and institutional discourses that reveal and produce art works as meaningful and valuable. Programmes of fine art study offer maximum freedom to individuals to initiate and produce work, even when, as is often the case, students are hazy about where their ideas have come from, and where the work is ultimately heading. Tutors encourage productive 'not-knowing' whilst constraining the tendency for students to fall back on what are recognized to be ideological forms of 'common sense' explanation, conservative forms of expression, erroneous assumptions about communicative immediacy, and clichéd notions of creativity. This is achieved through maximum exposure to contemporary artistic knowledge in the form of 'advanced' artworks, theories and processes, themselves embedded within avant-gardist, trans-disciplinary and pedagogical traditions.

Such disciplinary ‘constraints’ are therefore, in effect, tools to assist in the ambition towards difference and symbolic discovery, beyond habit and convention. The academic training or education of artists instills a questioning attitude to physical, symbolic, cultural and social material, primarily for the purposes of advancing art. Any additional benefit (or damage)—to the individual graduate, to society, to GDP, etc.—can be viewed as something like a side effect of this purpose.

The high degree of autonomy with respect to artistic production has been linked, historically, to the Romantic image of the artist, living a bohemian lifestyle free of traditional attachments, transgressive of social norms and overcoming of alienating work-life divisions. The ‘true’ artist is free of all commitments except the imperative attaching to his or her calling—something which might require or risk personal hardship and suffering. Self-imposed social exile of this sort arose, initially, from the necessity to protect what were felt to be crucial aspects of human life (the imagination, aesthetic sensibility, creative invention, etc.) from mass industrial processes and market values. An historical process reconfigured this protective ‘tending’ of vulnerable forms and meanings—conceived in terms of *general* social development—in such a way that ‘art’ acquired a ‘special’ value *in itself*, understood as something definitively separate from ordinary, ‘common life’. (Williams 1993, p. 296). Another more recent process has seen the bohemian lifestyle and the promise of self-fulfillment through creative activity mobilized to serve business interests in the new ‘flexible’ economy (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). Today, the appeal to aesthetically and linguistically performed individual difference and ‘specialness’ are part of the everyday language of celebrity and enterprise culture. Here, then, are two visions that need to be taken into account when the ideal of artistic autonomy is invoked; meanings which, as it were, come from outside of what may appear to be the immediate, disciplinary concerns of art school practice, but which nevertheless affect the way art is perceived and impact upon its broader capacities. Firstly, the development of contemporary art is disconnected, or put at a distance from culture in a wider, more ‘ordinary’ sense of the term. Secondly, bohemian ideals of creative autonomy, coalesce with the sorts of individualist modes of self-realization that define the competitive culture of neoliberalism, where every act and decision can be conceived in terms of advantageous investment in one’s ‘human capital’.

These days, fine art education no longer propounds but challenges a crude Romantic view of autonomy as an escape towards unencumbered self-determination. It tends nevertheless to under-acknowledge wider social and cultural relationships which effect the meanings and potential influence of art through a fixation on the prestigious art world: its forms of display, dominant discourses and markers of esteem are often presented as the sole or primary point of reference for student work. This occurs especially when attending directly to student art in crits and tutorials, but also via artist and curator talks programmes and in the publicity language of course descriptors. The logic of direct *external* intrusion in the shape of government backed student debt and graduate employment statistics has been to force the issue of art’s social relationships and artists’ practical dependencies to the surface, although ‘professional practice’ is often conceptually separated, through curriculum structures, from the ‘real’ *intrinsic* issues that remain the focus of practical artistic study (see Kenning 2018). Professional practice also often operates precisely to *reinforce* the very ‘autonomy’ that ‘vulgar’ discussions of career and economic sustainability would seem to put at risk—and therein lies the irony. The commercial and symbolic markets for contemporary art, which might make a future art practice sustainable for the individual graduate, are dependent themselves, in terms of the artistic ‘value’ in which they deal, on maintaining the illusion of art’s ‘special’ status as ‘free’, non-determined and possessed of some transcendent ‘intellectual surplus value’ (Graw 2010, p. 10). Such specialness not only places contemporary art beyond the appreciation or understanding of ‘popular’ tastes, but also the capacity of the vast majority of academically educated but professionally ‘failed’ artists. The attainment of personal agency through artistic work is practically dependent on one’s ability to ‘make it work’, that is to sustain, materially and psychologically, an artistic practice. But most graduates will be condemned to the ‘actually existing’ bohemianism of precarious, often low paid work, and ‘amateur artist’ work patterns, ballasted, psychologically (but perhaps professionally bolstered too) by self-instituting graduate communities and support networks. The sorts of institutional recognition

that release resources and affirm individual activity, and so establish a more sustainable basis for continued artistic practice are, as all art tutors and most students know, rare—which is to say unevenly distributed. Professional strategies aimed at increasing the individual’s competitive advantage in this market for artists—a game already severely skewed by pre-existent personal connections and behavioural knowledge, as well as access to financial support—will not change this basic *general* fact (see [Kenning 2018](#)).

For all but the most prestigious institutions (those with greatest access to art world institutions, e.g. through bursaries, residencies, prizes, etc.) this fact is officially acknowledged in ‘professional’ course literature, where prospective students are advised as to the wide range of non-fine artist work the course could equip them for—based partly on surveys of what alumni *actually* do for money. This includes ‘commercial’ work within the creative industries, as well as art teaching and employment within contemporary art organisations and amidst art world activities—supporting, that is, the production of work by other (recognized) artist. Professionally educated artists become, then, what [Sholette \(2011\)](#) calls artistic ‘dark matter’—that ‘obscure mass of “failed” artists’ (p. 3) upon which the art world itself depends to uphold its minority system of ‘winners’. But, in my experience at least, and judging by the division between disciplinary training and career support evident in fine art course literature, these issues rarely make incursions into the studios, workshops and seminar rooms. There is little doubt, however, that issues of sustainability and distribution have, in the last decade especially, become a part of contemporary art discourse itself—a minor one, in the scheme of global art world developments, and with little perceivable effect beyond some minor, but perhaps significant, gestures towards artists’ pay. Sholette sums up the issue with depressing acuity: is the real function of fine art education today to discipline ‘growing numbers [of art students] into a system that mechanically reproduces prolific failure?’ (p. 3).

To adequately address these issues means challenging the ‘institutional autonomy’ that constitutes the look and value of contemporary art. In an essay which surveys the return of ‘politics’ to galleries and art discourse—collaborative, ‘socially engaged’ and ‘relational’ practices, etc.—[Day \(2009\)](#) highlights the peculiar critical reflex, amongst art theorists and critics, to warn of the dangers of ‘heteronomy’—the ‘instrumental’ use of art for ‘other’ (political, social) purposes. Day counters: ‘The alleged “risk” to art today is vastly overstated. Indeed, most so-called “political art” remains thoroughly autonomous in its mode, institutional function and discursive situation’ (p. 394). There simply is no threat to artistic autonomy within the contemporary art system, she suggests. ‘The unease might be more justified—and matters might be considerably more interesting—were this in fact the case’ (p. 394). It is the question of artistic autonomy as social separation, and its institutional reproduction through systems of exclusion that I wish to focus on in this essay by reflecting on how these relate to wider issues of agency and control. It is to ideas of ‘culture’ that I turn in order to address these wider concerns: art *as part of* culture and cultural development in general, and how the specific culture *of* art effects such development. From this perspective artistic autonomy and agency are precisely questions of cultural production and struggle, not goals which demand separation from ‘culture’. My interlocutors in this somewhat speculative endeavor are the Minimalist artist Carl Andre and the cultural theorist Raymond Williams, two names that are not often seen together but which might well collide in an art school context—although today’s students are much more likely to be introduced to the sculptor than to the cultural theorist, an omission which, I would say, is to the detriment of art and artists.

## 2. Art Is What We Do

The belief that ‘art is what we do’ whilst ‘culture is what is done to us’ to quote Carl Andre (although he in fact ascribes these words to an anonymous ‘sage’) serves to reinforce the conviction amongst those who choose to embark on a life or career of art making, that the value of what we do lies in art’s claims to autonomy and active agency. In thus speaking Andre seems to position the artist as cultural outsider or escapee—someone who, through commitment to a particular practice, attempts

to set him or herself beyond instrumentalizing and ideological forces beyond our control. In acting upon us, culture imposes limitations on our freedom to act. Art is the antidote—that which enables us, through the exertion of effort no doubt, to actively resist external imposition.

Andre's words are taken from a somewhat informal address to students at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1969, and it was as a London-based art student in the mid-1990s that I first came across them. Andre's implication that art is a constructive form of escape struck me as being true with respect to my own cultural background and embrace of difference in the form of an identification with what seemed like the strangely novel shapes and practices of the modern and contemporary art which I was being introduced to. It also chimed with a negative sense that art education represented an available route out of mundane and subordinate work, although exactly where this route led, and by what means, remained extremely hazy—things would 'just happen', I supposed. This promise of personal autonomy—the 'license' enabling public expression by artistic means of what might otherwise remain private obsessions—inevitably proved partial given the necessity, after college, of finding money, time and opportunities to make and show art work. Even within the 'special' time set aside for artistic work amidst other commitments, engaging in projects which, while fulfilling in many respects—DIY collaborations which actively rejected the polished, 'professional' art world—required enormous efforts to gain any access whatever to funds, space, and publicity in the competitive, 'winner-take-all' market for attention. Life as an artist, I realized, was not something necessarily synonymous with either personal autonomy or dignity. Perhaps the greatest contradiction to the myth of artistic freedom that artists themselves encounter pertains to the extreme levels of personal dependency that prevail in order to sustain artistic work and communicate with a wider audience.

Looking at it now, what is hard to accept about Andre's statement, at least at first glance, is the implication that doing art is an activity free of conventions, barriers, and externally imposed demands. On the contrary, what appears in the 'white cube' is in various aspects influenced and determined by and dependent on 'external' factors. In establishing a distinct active-passive dualism Andre draws a curtain over the ways in which it might be *art* that renders us passive—through systems of control, delay and exclusion. These issues, which have to do with the kinds of relations and relationships which are prevalent in the contemporary art system (see [Kenning 2009](#)), are simply peripheral or irrelevant, conceptually absented from the terms of Andre's analysis, as they indeed remain from most critical art commentary, focused almost exclusively as it is on the work that appears in the gallery (or on that work's 'author'). If a focus on the consecrated artwork leads to a limited, even ideologically distorted notion of critical autonomy and artistic agency, then, by contrast, it may be that a focus on *culture* will lead us, gradually, to a more satisfying notion and realization of these things. Such a 'working-out', in times of cultural confusion and a desire, amongst artists, for meaning and political traction, would constitute what Williams calls 'a slow reach [ . . . ] for control.'

Whatever its perspectival distortions or rhetorical exaggerations, Andre's succinct formula raises the whole problematic of culture in a way which productively links the question of creative agency to a social totality. This is in contrast to the more prevalent tendency in art education today where 'culture' as a theme (as distinct from any material whatever available for exploration and use) tends to be approached in the more individualistic and performative terms of popular or subcultural consumption, lifestyle and identity. Whilst a new right politics has sought to re-signify 'identity politics' as an elite, leftist academic plot (whilst seeking to construct its own forms of populist essential identity), it is also the case that a sole focus on representational issues of gender, sexuality and ethnicity can serve to obscure the more abstract economic and social relations that link us together in class terms, that is within common patterns and processes of hierarchy, exploitation and power. At least this is the case if identity is presented as 'a political goal in itself' rather than 'the beginning of a deeper, theoretical exploration of oppression and resistance strategies' ([Kumar et al. 2018](#)). The authors continue: 'If only the personal can be political, then solidarity ceases to be desirable—let alone achievable.' [Harris \(2004\)](#) makes a similar point in an essay on Williams: identity politics movements are 'inherently partial, subject-position-limited, fragmentary and therefore self-limiting. There appears to be no logic that

can articulate between these social blocs, forging an alliance based on shared principles not rooted in specific identity politics' (p. 67). In this context, returning to Williams does not entail overcoming questions of identity—quite the contrary. It is rather that the central issues of community belonging and self-creation are viewed always from the perspective of a contribution to 'the whole texture' (Williams [1961] 1965, p. 56). The 'working-out of the idea of culture' is a basis for 'common enquiry' (Williams 1993, p. 295) in the midst of diversity of experience, an endeavour which necessitates that attention to particular cultural instances must always be carried out from the wider perspective of the social whole.

### 3. Active 'Art' vs. Passive 'Culture'

The immediate context for Andre's thoughts about 'culture' is a point he makes about the success of Pop art, which he puts down to people's desire for a 'culture of recognitions' (Andre [1969] 2004, p. 23). Later, in response to a question from a student, he admits that 'of course, I was formed by my culture. But the point is, it went from the passive state to the active state' (p. 23). Andre is not naively claiming absolute subjective autonomy, but seems to be highlighting how culture itself can be acted upon or made active as art. Andre describes what he calls 'advanced art' as that which 'meets the most cultural resistance (p. 22), suggesting that 'culture' is an impediment to artistic advance, but perhaps, by extension, a material that can be worked on. 'Culture' is then a rather slippery signifier and may condense various notions. Is 'art' simply that which 'culture' resists, or the name for the active and inventive, nascent side of culture itself? At this point, I'd like to expand upon the active-passive problematic that Andre's quotation initiates, and propose (beyond anything the artist himself might have necessarily meant) the following three definitions:

Firstly, 'culture' is simply 'the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society' to quote the Oxford Dictionary of English; the collective backdrop against which 'art' makes its singular mark. Culture is what forms and conditions us as individuals, providing meaning and identifying us in terms of belonging to one group rather than another. It is inherited tradition and the pervasion of 'common sense'. If art is what we do, then culture (which is 'done to us') is who we are, unless, that is, we can establish or construct, against inevitable resistance, new attachments, identifications, forms and meanings.

Secondly, 'culture' represents the 'low' side of the old high-low arguments. Metonymically it stands for what Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) call the 'culture industry'; that is to say popular culture under conditions of industrial mass production and distribution for profit. Writing in the 1940s, culture had become, for the authors, formulaic, mechanical and undifferentiated: 'Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part' (p. 120). What is most sinister for them is the totalizing aspect of this system, the way it does not merely offer supposedly banal or low quality entertainment as an escape from the alienating regimes of work—a judgment that would remain at the level of taste—but is constitutive of the world itself as a form of mass pedagogy or psychological and behavioural training, leading individuals to automatic responses and imitative forms of conduct. Culture becomes a totalizing machine: 'The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry' (p. 126). What is at stake is precisely personal autonomy and the active powers of the imagination, something which Adorno makes it the task of a difficult, advanced modernist art to maintain as a pained form of aesthetic withdrawal from society.

Finally, and in seeming opposition to the previous definition, 'culture' names 'high' art insofar as it is manifested as a class coded, institutionally demarcated and, especially today, readily consumable zone of life, leisure and heritage which we call 'the arts'. Whilst enabling visibility, it is the specific meanings and contexts of artistic production, their embeddedness within living and social processes, which are in danger of being lost once artefacts are coherently identified under this label and packaged for general high cultural consumption and historical preservation. 'Once a work of art has gotten in to the culture, it's dead,' says Andre, a death applicable to the definition I'm proposing here, whereby art's singularity, specificity and capacity for 'resistance' is liable to a violent flattening and

cooption in terms of its general ‘recognition’ and labeling as (high) art. This is culture in its *ideal* form, subject to appropriate modes of appreciation and behavior, even when (or precisely because) it is not generally ‘understood’. Perhaps (advanced) art, in this sense, actively thrives only for limited periods in hidden, tight-knit avant-gardist enclaves outside of market tastes and the temples of official culture. Interestingly, and quite against the ‘institutional’ definition, this is what Bourdieu (1993) means by ‘autonomous’ modern art—that which is autonomous *from* the art market and its bourgeois, academic tastes.

Definitions one and two appear to reinforce old dichotomies to the benefit of those invested, symbolically and economically, in elitist distinctions which separate art from ‘common’ tastes and lived experience. Seen in terms of the final definition, however, Andre’s comments could be interpreted more radically as a confrontation with the authoritative operational modes of the art world itself. This corresponds with Ruben A. Gaztambide-Fernandez (2013) notion of how the very term ‘the arts’ is a form of cultural authority which, in fact, disables and distracts from the goal of genuine cultural production—although Gaztambide-Fernandez is approaching this from the perspective of wider cultural production, not avant-gardism. He writes: ‘rather than a thing or substance, the concept of the arts operates as a discursive construct’ by means of which certain cultural practices are given the status of art ‘in ways that reflect and reproduce the larger social and cultural context (p. 215), i.e., in ways that performatively re-confirm which sorts of things are to be included, and which excluded from the category ‘art’. Because of this, top down liberal advocacy for the arts in terms of what it can do to improve individual lives or society as a whole, only reproduces the authority and tastes of those who decide what counts as proper culture in the first place. In a phrase which echoes Andre, whilst overturning the very art vs. culture duality that animates Andre’s comments, he writes: ‘rather than thinking about the arts as doing something to people, we should think about artistic forms as something people do’ (p. 226). Cultural production from this perspective is not limited to the practices of either self-defining or institutionally recognized artists, but is a general inter-human practice which denies any passive notion of cultural formation or framing insofar as culture involves the ways in which ‘meanings are negotiated and constructed through the particularities of how people come together under specific circumstances’ (pp. 225–26). This way of thinking can take us on to a more radical notion of ‘cultural democracy’, which for the Cultural Policy Collective (2004) should not consist in giving socially disadvantaged and other non-gallery going constituencies greater ‘access’ to ‘historically privileged cultural arenas’, but in ‘people’s rights to public space and the public sector as domains of democratic expression’ (p. 3).

#### 4. Who, or What, Makes Art?

Setting art up as the active hero battling an evil, zombifying culture ultimately does nothing but reinforce the most pernicious individualist myths pervading the culture of contemporary fine art. Far more useful to us in constructing a theory of artistic or cultural agency will be to return art to the wider historical and social processes which constitute it as a distinct set of practices. This entails adopting institutional and discursive approaches which do not deny but rather expose and explore art’s dependencies and determinations—brief examples of which I will now lay out.

I start with Peter Burger’s influential ideas about autonomy as outlined in his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Burger 1984). Burger draws on Herbert Marcuse’s theory of culture which, according to Burger, ‘provides the important theoretical insight that works of art are not received as single entities, but within institutional frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of the works’ (p. 12). What is expressed in ‘autonomous’ modern art with its focus on intrinsic concerns (art for art’s sake) derives only secondarily from the will to freedom of the artist. The primary determining factor is actually the historical condition of art’s separation from everyday practice because of a lack of any established role for the artist in a capitalist society. The artist-as-bohemian is not ‘self-made’ at all but is socially produced as an emblem of freedom equated with social marginality, forced to compete for patrons and buyers who admire precisely art’s ‘uselessness’, its distance from everyday concerns

and calculations. Following Marcuse, Burger describes how art's appeal lies in its ability to express values like truth and beauty as a sort of protest against the limitations and abuses of profit-oriented practices which dominate social life, whilst lacking the ability to effect such practices in any substantial way, safely contained as they are within the autonomous institution called 'art'. This leads Burger to define the early twentieth century 'avant-garde' (especially Dada) not as an extension of modernist aesthetic experimentations, but as a negation of those 'autonomous' formalist experiments in so far as they manifest a separation from everyday life that the avant-garde artists sought (unsuccessfully for Burger) to overcome.

Next, the whole active-art vs. passive-culture dichotomy is interestingly reproduced critically by the anthropologist Clifford James in his 'Art-Culture System' diagram (Clifford 1988, p. 224). His essay on collecting concerns the fate of 'tribal' objects extracted from their territorial and historical contexts and relocated to Western museums, art markets, archives and discourses. What interests us here is the light he casts on the discursive category of 'art'. 'Artifacts' of the ethnographic museum are designated in terms of 'culture' i.e. as products of the collective, stemming from tradition, whilst 'masterpieces' of the art museum are, by contrast, original and singular (p. 224). Both categories, however, remain 'authentic' as against all that is neither properly art nor culture (fakes, mass commercially produced 'art', tourist 'art', etc.). But the really fascinating aspect of James' diagram is the way these same objects are shown to be capable of transformation over time. The key mechanism by which cultural objects become art objects is *formal*: works fit for scientific study start to become works viewed in terms of aesthetic impact—in other words, they gain autonomy from social function. Alternatively, the key mechanism by which art objects become cultural artifacts is *contextual*: artworks begin to be viewed not as aesthetically autonomous but, more scientifically, as representative of the common disciplinary norms, tastes and cultural beliefs of the time and place they are from. Certain paintings in a museum, for example, begin to lose their status as 'masterpieces' the more they are contextualized as exemplars of a particular 'historical-cultural "period"' (pp. 224–25). The lesson is that art is conventional, a product of deeper collective determinations and social constraints, which are liable to gradual reshaping by various means but which cannot be 'escaped'—a fact that is easier to see in retrospect. As Elkins (2001) puts it, in the context of studying catalogues of student exhibitions, and reflecting on the illusion of diversity we experience at graduation shows of our own time, 'In the oldest catalogues [e.g. from the Royal Academy at the turn of the twentieth century] the students' work seems to be all done by one person, and in the newest, each student seems to be a lone innovator. The passage of time smoothes difference down to uniformity' (p. 68).

Finally, not only is any art work a 'product of its time', which is to say it carries, often unconsciously as far as the 'author' is concerned, the imprint of complex forms of influence and reproduction, it is not even, in a more immediate sense, an individual creation at all, but the result of a larger network of producers. These 'patterns of collective activity' are what Howard Becker famously calls an 'art world' (Becker 1982, p. i). Artistic production relies upon a multifarious 'network of people whose cooperative activity [is] organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things' (p. x). Nor indeed is the artist self-proclaimed, but similarly 'produced' in concrete but complex ways. For Pierre Bourdieu, in order to produce socially recognized art, the artist must him or herself be recognized through the 'accumulated social energy' generated by the whole field of art (Bourdieu 1993, p. 78).

The foregoing depictions of artistic production vary according to disciplinary approach (art theory, anthropology, sociology), and in terms of emphasis and intention, but they concur on the major point: it is a mistake to view art through the single lens of individual creation. This is also Williams' position. For him cultural production cannot be understood if we look only at the individual creative act, without considering the meanings embodied by conventions and institutions (Williams [1961] 1965, p. 56). I will at this point take a closer look at Williams' analysis.

## 5. Art Is Ordinary

If we begin from the whole texture, we can go on to study particular activities, and their bearings on other kinds. Yet we begin normally from the categories themselves, and this has led again and again to a very damaging suppression of relationships. Each kind of activity in fact suffers, if it is wholly abstracted and separated. (Williams [1961] 1965, p. 56)

In his 1961 book *The Long Revolution*, Raymond Williams constructs a cultural analysis which proceeds ‘from the whole texture’, and in this way challenges both formalist and ‘minority art’ approaches which tend to isolate art from society. In denying that art falls into a special category of experience or that the artist is uniquely creative, Williams in fact allows us to envisage a more ambitious conception of artistic agency insofar as it participates in the active making of our ‘common associative life’ (p. 56). This participation actually occurs amongst all spheres of human communication, including politics, technology and family life: ‘a whole world of acting and interacting relationships’ (p. 56). ‘We create our human world,’ he writes, ‘as we have thought of art being created. Art is a major means of precisely this creation’ (p. 54). Art, in other words, contributes to a wider collective project.

Williams develops his analysis of culture according to three general categories, which he labels the ‘ideal’, the ‘documentary’ and the ‘social’. The ‘ideal’ views culture as ‘a state or process of human perfection, in terms of certain absolute or universal values’; the ‘documentary’ is ‘the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded’; finally, the ‘social’ defines culture as ‘a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior’ (p. 57). It is characteristic of Williams’ intent that he seeks in his theory of culture neither to isolate the different definitions nor smooth out the differences, but to engage at the level of what he sees to be a ‘genuine complexity, corresponding to real elements in experience’ (p. 59) and to focus precisely at the points where they interrelate: ‘any particular definition [ . . . ] which would exclude reference to the others, is inadequate’ (p. 59), he states.

The three definitions of culture might loosely be aligned with the tripartite definitions I proposed earlier in this essay, except here, of course, ‘culture’ is not set forth as the negative term in relation to an active conception of ‘art’, but is, on the contrary, the very means by which we—artists, cultural theorists, students, everyone (and in whatever capacity)—can make sense and take control of our collective situation. If the idea of cultural ‘documents’ corresponds in some respect to our description of recognized artistic works, rendered ‘autonomous’ through extraction from their socio-historical contexts, then Williams cautions that we should keep the whole process in view, so that ‘the written and painted records’ are not marked off ‘from the rest of man’s life in society’ (p. 60).

The ‘ideal’, to the extent that certain artworks are meant to embody what Williams calls ‘values which can be seen to compose a timeless order’ (p. 57), agree somewhat with our earlier description of ‘the arts’ as a discursive construction which places consecrated products in designated high cultural zones—sanctified spaces that bring to mind churches or temples. Of course the documentary and ideal in the above senses cannot in effect be separated, as it the institutional function of museums and specialist archives to make the artistic documents available for appreciation and critical analysis (to keep ‘genuine culture alive’ as conservatives would have it). Finally, Williams’ ‘social’ definition corresponds clearly with the description of culture as commonly held beliefs, practices and values. This definition will ‘include analysis of elements in the way of life that to followers of other definitions are not “culture” at all’—industrial techniques, family structures, mass media, etc. (p. 58). However, it is, for Williams, invalid to reduce either (‘ideal’) cultural development or specific manifestations of art and learning to a mere by-product or ‘passive reflection’ of society’s ‘real’ material interests (p. 60). Alternately, far from being a passive backdrop, the social view of culture enables us to see how our values, attitudes, meanings, and so on are worked through and collaboratively constructed via complex patterns of interaction and organization, towards which artists play a part, alongside others. It is significant that Williams does not dispense with the ‘ideal’ view of culture, but rather recasts

it in democratic terms as a process of collective advance, thus breaking from elitist associations of minority forms. Whilst critiquing the notion of absolute values—‘normally an extension of the values of a particular tradition or society’—and human perfection ‘which implies a known ideal towards which we can move’, Williams advocates culture as a ‘process of general growth’ (p. 59)—an image that returns us to the original sense of culture as ‘the tending of natural growth’, from which all later definitions are metaphorical extensions (see Williams 1993, p. 335; Williams 1988, p. 87). It is this general sense of growth that Williams wants to keep hold of in terms of a cultural inheritance which, when rediscovered and applied in any particular situation, ‘can contribute radically to the growth of man’s powers to enrich his life, to regulate his society, and to control his environment’ (p. 59).

We might sum up Williams’ approach as an attempt to grasp culture in the actuality of its complex organization, where particular processes and manifestations (relating to specific institutions) are not, however, abstracted to a general level, whilst general processes are not ignored through an exclusive focus on the particular. ‘Strange systems and images’ can, from this perspective, be made ‘common property’ alongside more common narratives and familiar modes of description and representation (p. 56). But this does not simply happen—and here we can apply judgment to artistic practices, on the basis of a work’s wider contribution towards issues of everyday agency, freedom and advance. In what ways, we might ask, are artists and artworks promoting (or stymying) the development of the whole organization? Key here is the question of communication, because creative production, and the organization of experience that it implies, is a multi-channel process. Artistic innovation is normally a question ‘of extension of meanings and modification of means,’ rather than absolute novelty or historical rupture. Without a certain degree of ‘recognition’ as to what is presented as art, ‘new meaning could hardly be communicated at all’ (p. 49). If general growth is the measure, then ‘a significant area of description and response must be maintained,’ and, in this way, the energy generated as a result of the artist’s struggle for new forms of artistic organization ‘recharges’ the whole social texture (p. 50). This, I would argue, is a question of social traction. How artistic invention, rooted in its own institutions and traditions, operates as culture in the general, organizational, collective sense.

Let us briefly consider how such an impetus towards wider social factors might apply with respect to fine art education by returning to the current art world trend for collaborative, collective and socially-oriented practices. Kester (2011) raises the question of whether this trend is simply part of modern/contemporary art’s ‘ongoing struggle to identify, and then displace, normative conventions’ (p. 7)—in other words, is it the latest manifestation of the art world’s own ‘avant-gardist’ convention of repeatedly challenging social and art historical norms? Kester thus points to the way the collaborative turn in art takes on a double character, something which, in general terms, can be viewed ‘as part of a cyclical paradigm shift *within* the field of art, even as the nature of this shift involves an increasing permeability *between* “art” and other zones of symbolic production (urbanism, environmental activism, social work, etc.)’ (p. 7). Kester is wary of the separation that often occurs between political insight and ‘the actuality of lived experience’ whereby ‘critical’ art ‘takes on a life of its own, operating independently of the mechanisms of social and political change necessary to realize the ideals on which it is founded’ (p. 14). When it comes to notions of collective practice, the problematic is highly relevant to fine art education given that ‘collaborative’ and ‘public space’ projects are a curriculum staple. From the perspective of the analysis laid out here, the emphasis should be on ‘permeability’—the way in which artistic development can occur with the social whole in mind, so that issues of environment, urbanism, etc. do not become mere ‘subject matter’ for autonomous work, but the basis for mutual learning across practices, and an opportunity to ground symbolic developments within social spaces and processes. What can easily occur is a rather banal reification of ‘collaboration’ as an off-the-shelf ‘disruption’ of the sorts of conventional modes of individual, authorial expression favoured by many art students, and so the group or outdoor project can remain ‘within the field of art’. Generic collaborative working may have other inherent benefits, particular for first year students, but it is only within a framework that considers more widespread and ingrained modes of individualism and institutional

exclusion, whilst mapping connections, that artistic collaboration and socially-oriented practices can hope to make a more urgent contribution to culture.

This particular example from the fine art curriculum in fact situates the art department or college territorially and in terms of its wider social functions beyond the major courses it offers and the students currently doing them. Outside of typical institutional collaborations within the networks of contemporary art (museums, public galleries, etc.), liaisons and interactions with broader constituencies and organizations often seem to fall between staff in charge of rent seeking activities and corporate sponsorship on the one hand, and those in charge of ‘widening participation’ on the other. Activities of the latter are in fact crucial to any critical conception of art school culture, but my argument would be that connections to the world outside the college doors (local schools, businesses, residents, activist groups, public services, etc.) should become a concern placed at the heart of the curriculum itself, forming part of the student’s learning.<sup>1</sup> Art colleges and departments need not be enclaves, but visible places both of accessible public utility, and channels enabling student practices to enter into the local fabric (and vice versa through admission policies). I shall return to the question of social embeddedness at the end of the paper.

## 6. The Social Relationship

It is in the concluding section of his book *Culture and Society* from 1958 that Williams introduces his idea of ‘working-class culture’, something which he opposes to ‘bourgeois culture’, thus opening to view a fundamental antagonistic rift in the social fabric (Williams 1993). In so doing, Williams’ primary intention is not to identify an authentic popular art that can be distinguished from supposedly high artistic forms enjoyed by an educated, ‘cultured’ minority. He is not searching for a ‘cultural politics’ through which an essential working class community could cohere as an oppositional identity. As Jason M. Baskin explains, for Williams, ‘culture is not derivative of class; it is not the property of a particular social group but encompasses the common meanings to which all members of society contribute’ (Baskin 2013, p. 112). Because culture as a whole becomes the agent of social transformation, Williams is able to transcend what Baskin describes as ‘the entire conceptual division between an exclusive, enlightened minority and a broader populace, which has dominated the politics of culture since the collapse of the modernist avant-garde’ (p. 110). The notion of a ‘common culture’ with which we have been dealing, is not, however, meant to suggest or recommend harmony amidst real lived difference and social division. Culture is always political; it remains ‘a site of struggle’ (Mulhern 2009, p. 37) in the sense of a battle for influence over which meanings will become common (or ‘hegemonic’). The primary antagonistic fault line is to be found neither amidst struggles over representation, nor in the separation between ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ forms. Whilst these issues enter the fray, they do so as secondary factors attached to the major fact:

The basis of a distinction between bourgeois and working-class culture is only secondarily in the field of intellectual and imaginative work [ . . . ]. The crucial distinction is between alternative ideas of the nature of social relationship. (p. 325)

The split can now be envisaged not primarily in terms of artistic forms, but in terms of opposing political ideas about ways of living together, ways of relating socially. This division is identified for Williams by the terms ‘individualism’ and ‘cooperation’—a basic dichotomy only apparently complicated by the middle class ideal of ‘service’, which in fact, as Williams demonstrates, serves the bourgeois individualism that is the ruling ideology (p. 325). Whereas individualism adopts a view of society ‘as a neutral area within which each individual is free to pursue his own development and his own advantage as a natural right’ (p. 325), cooperation ‘regards society [ . . . ] as the positive means

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<sup>1</sup> A good example of this in practice is the curatorial collective AIR who operated at Central Saint Martins between 2007–2016. See <http://www.airstudio.org>.

for all kinds of development, including individual development' (p. 326). According to this view, 'Improvement is sought, not in the opportunity to *escape* from one's class, or to make a career, but in the general and controlled advance of all' (p. 326, my emphasis). In such a way common culture is grounded in principles of solidarity, 'the common interest as true self-interest' (p. 332).

One thing that stands out now reading Williams' text, placing it rather sharply in its post-War, welfare state context, is his view that individualism, although 'still dominant', is in decline: 'the course of recent history [being] marked by a long fighting retreat from this idea in its purest form' (p. 325). This hope, which seems to energize much of Williams' more general analysis, stands in stark contrast to our contemporary reality, where neoliberalism has reigned as an effective idea for the past four decades. Neoliberalism is a political project which has placed individualism center stage in numerous areas of our shared lives—definitively reversing the real collectivist advances that accompanied Williams' ideas about cultural growth. In Jeremy Gilbert's succinct formulation, 'neoliberalism understands individual interests to be largely mutually exclusive, self-interest to be the only motive force in human life and competition to be the most efficient and socially beneficial way for that force to express itself' (Gilbert 2013, p. 9). Three decades after Williams' optimistic prognosis, his colleague Hall (1988), seeking to work out Thatcherism's popular appeal, assessed the hegemonic mechanisms that had brought about such a monumental cultural shift in the UK: what Thatcherism aimed for and achieved was not simply the attainment of power, but 'a reversal in ordinary common sense' (p. 164) so that people's interests would be seen to coalesce with market interests.<sup>2</sup> Following Gramsci, Hall shows how 'interests are not given but have to be politically and ideologically constructed' (p. 167)—an idea which chimes with Williams' own impatience with 'reflection' theories, and his belief in the productive capacities of culture (activated here in a deleterious direction).

The social inequality that the ideal of competition logically produces is normatively justified through the dissembling concept of 'meritocracy', the claim that competition amongst individual agents enables talent and hard work to rise to the top. As Jo Littler argues, it is this 'socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest which both legitimizes inequality and damages community' (Littler 2013, p. 54). 'The ladder,' writes Williams, 'is a perfect symbol of the bourgeois idea of society, because, while undoubtedly it offers the opportunity to climb, it is a device which can only be used individually: you go up the ladder alone' (1993, p. 331). Rather than collective advance, the ladder offers only escape from one's class, and a weakening of the principle of solidarity. I have addressed some of these issues in an earlier essay, in relation to fine art education (Kenning 2018). What I call 'art world strategies' to enhance one's competitive advantage in the win or lose market for academically trained artists, have been adopted to some extent as a form of careers advice within the remit of fine art professional practice. Artists are told (how) to target the limited attention of cultural 'gatekeepers' (gallerists, curators, etc.) via the adoption of various forms of self-marketing and 'convivial' networking. Such advice does nothing, of course, to address the issues of distribution amongst artists as a whole, and in fact reproduces a distinctly individualistic, competitive culture. A few 'special' ones will make it, in a rigged system that relies on existing connections, financial means and cultural capital. Most artists feel, and occasionally express publicly, the unfairness, and the difficulties the system generates at a personal level, but seem incapable (or reluctant) to act in a more collective way so as to challenge operative structures and envisage a new culture of art that would act for the benefit of the majority (and at the expense of the minority who currently monopolize resources). Once again the issue is one of extricating questions of agency and control from what is available for artists through fixed art world systems and of perceiving the problem as a more general cultural one.

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<sup>2</sup> Thatcherism of course created alternative modes of collective identity through the projection of traditional 'family values' and a strident nationalism bolstered by the construction of enemies without and enemies within.

## 7. Conclusions

The historical gerrymandering of resources towards the leisure culture of the middle and upper classes means that art forms have evolved in separation from broad-based constituencies, often generating an autonomy of dubious value. One example of the scarring effects of such sustained separation is the way that visual art has institutionalized its own contestation [...]. The public arena of creative communication is displaced by a realm of increasingly privatized and specialized visual codes, often unfathomable, or irrelevant, to the majority. (Cultural Policy Collective 2004, p. 22)

This problem has haunted modern fine art practice: the problem of a “freedom” lacking tangible material, social hooks. Artists and art students are marginal as a class, but they’re also marginal culturally, as fine art has been trivialized as a cultural practice. Art is no longer central to the way most people make sense of the world. (Frith and Horne 1987, p. 61)

The two quotations which head this concluding section point to the problem of contemporary art’s dislocated relation with the wider culture. Of course, contemporary art is ‘everywhere’ these days—contemporary art museums are crowded, and certain English artists are so famous that they are known to much of the public by their first names. On the whole, however, the channels through which contemporary art reaches a wider audience—whether high cultural or mass media—still present art either as some sort of (comically pretentious) anomaly, or as embodying ideas excessive to the meanings and language of everyday life.<sup>3</sup> Frith and Horne make the point: precisely due to its special status, ‘art is trivialized as a cultural practice.’ Their apprehension that the populist dismissal of ‘high art’ is simply the other side of the coin to art’s idealized self-image is the very problem Williams addresses through his championing of ordinariness (not as ‘dumbing down’ of course, but in the sense that imaginative production and communicative invention are universal, that is ordinary, human attributes). The Cultural Policy Collective’s fierce critique of the professionalized art world, with its ‘unfathomable’ and ‘irrelevant’ ‘specialized visual codes’, makes the link between cultural separation and cultural resource distribution explicit. Just a few years after their pamphlet was published, publically funded contemporary art organizations were scrambling to resist the impact of austerity cuts (with little popular support it should be noted), whilst failing to imagine any more radical recalibration of the wider cultural landscape beyond the vague and ideologically dubious discourses of wellbeing and economic growth.

Debates about the extent and desirability of art’s social embeddedness and relevance go back a long way, one well known but particularly powerful instance being the Frankfurt School debates on the effects of mass, technically reproduced art. Taking an opposed stance to Adorno, Walter Benjamin poses the question of significance in terms of pleasure:

The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. With regard to the screen, the critical and the receptive attitudes coincide. (p. 234)

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<sup>3</sup> The template for the popular representation of high art in the UK press is of course Andre’s *Equivalent VIII*, or ‘pile of bricks’. It was precisely because Andre presented, through simple methods of arrangement, such ‘ordinary’, functional objects as ‘art’, therefore attracting a certain ‘surplus’ price tag (chargeable to the UK tax payer—hence the indignation fuelling all the fun-poking) that ‘philistine’ opinion smelled a rat—this kind of advanced art was simultaneously beyond the comprehension of a wider public and understood *all too well*. (For an account of the dialectically productive figure of the ‘philistine’ for art theory see Beech and Roberts 2002). It would be interesting to consider how the very demotic and embodied, situational ambitions of Minimalist art in fact heightened the consecrating powers of the gallery itself (its ability to turn *anything* it contained into art), and led to the demand that work of this kind have more physical space all to itself. (See Krauss (1997) for the way Minimalism inaugurated the spatial model for the global contemporary art museum, facilitating zones of aesthetic compensation for audiences living amidst everyday postmodern fragmentation.)

The implication is that through cinema, even the strangest, newest ways of seeing the world were somehow ‘recognized’ and so found a means to gain a hold on experience more generally, such that art could actually transform the ways a broad populace think and act. For Frith and Horne, it was commercial art in its ‘counter-cultural’ mode as rock and pop music, which provided the answer to ‘the problem of a “freedom” lacking tangible material, social hooks’. British ‘art school’ bands went on to have a profound pedagogical, political and aesthetic influence on the wider cultural landscape, disseminating avant-gardist ideas as commonly available material through names, lyrics, attitudes and images, and being a crucial determining factor in the decision of many, including myself, to attend art school. It is this issue of cultural embeddedness that John Beck and Matthew Cornford highlight in their reflections on the now decimated system of independent local art and design schools that flourished in England in the 60s and 70s (Beck and Cornford 2012). Experimental practices and ‘advanced cultural debates’ were grounded ‘within the fabric of an often more prosaic life of local everyday concerns’ (p. 61). The authors continue: ‘What was particularly striking about this cultural moment was that this alternative way of life was being lived in hundreds of towns across the country by thousands of often working-class school-leavers and paid for by local authorities’ (p. 61). The sense of ordinariness that Beck and Cornford convey does not exclude avant-gardist practices but, on the contrary, makes them available within the common fabric. And so art courses offering technical ‘vocational’ training became the ‘portal[s] through which the most advanced cultural debates and practices of the time could be encountered’ (p. 61). By contrast with the culturally transformative public sector model of developmental ‘tending’ that defines the local art school experiment, the contemporary targeting of public resources on ‘custom-fitted galleries and museums’ (p. 66)—monuments to the ‘achieved totality of the global art market’ (p. 66)—offers little ‘to the experience of those it purports to serve’ (p. 66)—except, perhaps, the prospect of culture-led social cleansing.

Today a more socially grounded conception of artistic agency goes hand in hand with a reconfiguration of artistic relationships towards principles of solidarity, and artistic ambitions for general social advance. Opening out resources and opportunities would enable more and different voices to be heard and sustained, and therefore a wider, more culturally representative cross section of experiences to enter into the complex of organized and communicated meaning. Against neoliberal individualism and cultural exclusion, the construction of ‘a new cultural order’ (Hall 1988, p. 170) demands the widest range of encounters, alliances and inter-cultural allegiances. Art schools should exemplify the collective tending of difference, not the reproduction of a system shaped by minds and forms cast from similar cultural moulds. Teaching art as culture, in Williams’ sense, simply means opening up a conversation about the kinds of artistic agency and creative control which can only be achieved collectively.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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