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Re. Intellectual Bankruptcy: Response to Jon Bowen

Sheona Beaumont, June 2010

JB is too quick to dismiss the value of higher education at art school, and I hope you've had an overflow of protest to his letter. In my experience, it has a multitude of failings, but nevertheless girds you for life. At university, I found out that I really did want to pursue my career in art - not on the basis of how commercially-savvy or culturally-connected I was, but on the basis of how driven I felt (and feel) by its worthiness. I suspect it's all too true that students leave college with a proportionately greater amount of cynicism than idealism - certainly my third year on a BA Fine Art in 2001 was one where I became disillusioned by the process of degree show creation - the anxious self-scrutiny, endless critique and conceptual vacillation from tutors. I can see how that might have killed off Jon's friend's experience at Goldsmiths.

But having come from a secondary education that put subjects such as Maths and Physics on a pedestal for intellectual pursuit, and definitely not art (small 'a'), I have found at BA level that the remit for depth of tradition, discovery and research in my work is wonderfully rich and rewarding. Those are the skills that I left with. To point out that business and craftsmanship skills are woefully-lacking at university courses is true, and more often than not leads to graduates abandoning ship soon after leaving, or producing poor-quality tat, but university isn't a production-line for art commerce and was never meant to be. Learning about trade and the mechanics of economical survival are traditionally the realm of apprenticeships, or being 'on the job' in the real world. Some education at university in this regard might be welcome, but let's not degrade the spirit of enquiry, the lessons of cultural heritage and interpretation, the process of intensive peer-review and challenge, the critique and accountability from being at an institution for learning. Yes, you also learn elsewhere, but there's a qualitative difference to a qualification - and that's what students like me chose to pay for.

It smacks a little of arrogance to suggest that self-taught artists should be able to teach at a level they themselves never experienced: how, by comparison, should a self-taught doctor be received as a lecturer on a BSc in Medicine, let alone by the public? Is this demand not another symptom of the degrading of intellectual credit ascribed to universities? Doesn't it also undermine the separate, but essential accreditation of teaching skills? It should be hard to enter academic teaching, because that's the bar which protects, envisions and circumscribes what students experience at university. And that experience shouldn't be dictated by job-servicing the institution's staff, nor by turning the imparting and nurturing of knowledge into a business school for marketing success. Is that what making art is about?