**Prof. Ian Brown**

**Another Emergency Meeting: Artistic Responses to Instabilities in the Art School**

**Abstract**

This research draws upon the experience of three art school lecturers who, together, work as Common Culture. All have witnessed the transformation of the art school from a relatively free educational space for creative exploration and experimentation into a highly structured provision, centered on a commercial transaction between the student-client and the institution. The paper will explore the use of autoethnographic methods within our artistic practice to investigate the impact of various changes that have been taking place within Higher Education in the UK.

In response, Common Culture has developed a series of narratives, set within a fictional art school, based on their collective experience. This has been developed into a comic/graphic novel for publication.

**Keywords:**

Autoethnography, contemporary artist practice, practice research, marketisation, neoliberalism, institutional critique, generative AI

**Introduction**

This paper will explore the use of autoethnographic methods within our artistic practice (Common Culture) to investigate the impact of various changes that have been taking place in Higher Education in the UK.  The research focuses on how institutions and their employees navigate the continual state of flux incurred by operating in contemporary Britain’s Neoliberal political landscape, and the pressures that this entails. This is grounded in the instability created as a consequence of the frequency of organisational changes (restructures and mergers) seemingly necessitated by the marketisation of the sector.

The work draws on Common Culture’s collective experience of having worked in Higher Education over several decades, and considers how staff, students, managers, and executives of Universities’ roles, behaviours, and expectations have changed (and continue to change). It is essential to note that we have primarily worked in post-1992 Universities, institutions that were previously Polytechnics, and which, in turn, had incorporated previously independent art schools. Post-92 institutions tend to be staffed by academics, lecturers, and students from working-class backgrounds, and these are the institutions most affected by financial pressures. We are also aware that there are equivalent contexts outside of the UK.

The project utilises forms of narrative storytelling, humour, and satire within a contemporary art context.

One area of interest lies in the relationship between “the institution” and “the individual” and the synergies or tensions that lie between them. This recognises that the institution operates as a form of power and authority, a seemingly homogenous entity, as well as a place of belonging, but it is also experienced as both faceless and ‘other’, as having agency and autonomy in its actions.

The research both utilises autoethnography as a method and draws on debates surrounding the implications of its usage in artistic practices, specifically, the relation to the authors’ own employment within the very structure they critique (relational ethics).

**Autoethnographic approaches**

Institutional Critique, as an enquiry, focuses on the art world and its institutions, including galleries, museums, and the art market, where autoethnographic methods are often effectively deployed in this context.

For us, producing research using an autoethnographic approach allows for reflection on our experiences as artists *and* academics operating within the institutions of the contemporary art world and higher education. Furthermore, as discussed by Ellis, this approach can facilitate the effective engagement of other artists, university employees, and those operating outside of these contexts (Ellis, 2011).

In terms of the question of relational ethics and its implications in autoethnographic work, can we be critical when we are contractually obliged not to bring our employing institution into disrepute?

*The New Eldorado*is an artwork proposed for *Manifesta 8 The European Biennial of Contemporary Art, Region of Murcia (Spain) in dialogue with Northern Africa.* Exploring the phenomena of cultural consumption, tourism, and the tradition of the historical "Grand Tour", The New El Dorado narrates an encounter between the specific characteristics of a place and the culture of others. The work was developed in response to the conditions and institutional behaviours of Manifesta, and an engagement with cultural workers involved in the biennial. The script included references to these experiences: the arguably questionable ‘ambitions’ of the organisation, as well as examples of problematic practices being undertaken.

The issue of relational ethics, here, is related to the work itself, framing a critique based on our own experiences with the Manifesta Foundation, or at the very least, its implicated role in setting the framework for the exhibition and our commissioned work. Our engagement with the curator, the foundation management team, other artists, and those working in administrative or support roles for the biennale contributed significantly to the development of the research, far more than initially proposed. The start of the artwork, for example, centres on discussions between two locals who were working in administrative roles for Manifesta. Building on discussions between them and ourselves, their dialogue frames a discussion about their roles within the biennale and their reflections on their own expectations.

**Art School research project:**

This current body of work began as a series of scripts in response to our experiences of the changes in higher education in the UK over a long period, during which structural, economic, political, and social shifts have occurred. This process was partly cathartic and, importantly, a way for us to process the stress and mental health implications of working in our sector. For a long time, this felt like a clandestine activity.

The UK University system is being ruthlessly administered – to be more efficient, economical, and marketable, with a transactional approach. It has adopted the strategies and languages of corporate business to be efficient and competitive in the marketplace. This neoliberal flux is ‘enforced’ by marketisation. As Frank Furedi (2011) states, “Since the late 1970s the culture of academic life has been transformed by the institutionalisation of the policies of marketisation. At least outwardly universities increasingly ape the managerial models of private and especially public sector corporations. Quaint academic rituals and practices have been gradually displaced by management techniques as departments mutate into cost centres often run by administrators recruited from the private and public sector.” Consequently, course and module structures are created with more prescriptive learning modes for potential students/customers. Course materials may declare the importance of developing independent and transferable skills, but, arguably, the institutional constraints limit independent critical learning.

In a neoliberal context, the academy*is* being stabilised, but as neoliberism itself operates in the instability of its contradictions between private and public “exporting responsibility to the private sector while still funding and managing these activities” (Nordensvärd, J. and Ketola, M., 2019) as a consequence is never able to reduce the state as much as its ambitions would indicate. “It appears that what we have is a highly controlled quasi-market that forces institutions to compete against one another for resources and funding” (Ferudi, 2011)

The process of developing the scripts, at a certain stage, was framed with a stronger sense of autoethnographic behaviour on our part. We began using footnotes to introduce an adjudicating voice, commenting on incidents, characters, or dialogue and relating them to broader contexts and experiences. Shifted from the scriptwriting form, these comments blended evidential approaches with more conversational commentary, often leading to healthy yet barbed exchanges between us and our potential biases.

**Generative Artificial Intelligence**

The use of generative AI for us was seen as appropriate in the context of the mismatch between certain views of an art school and the commercial systems and agendas it now operates within. Furthermore, the notion of the University as an entity, in and of itself, is comparable to the anthropomorphisation of AI systems, with both institutional actions and AI processes gaining agency. Furthermore, the relationship to this aspect of anthropomorphism and the increasing creativity assigned to generative AI raises particular concerns for artistic researchers:

“Many researchers have pointed out the issues that arise from the anthropomorphisation of AI systems, including shifting responsibility from the people and organizations that build these systems to the artifacts they build as if those artifacts have agency on their own. This anthropomorphisation is readily apparent in descriptions of image generators as if they are artists, even going as far as to claim that the image generators are “inspired” by the data they are trained on, similar to how artists are inspired by other artists’ works.” (Jiang et al, 2023)

The dataset provided at the outset of model training is limited to the imagery available online, which is, in itself, a resource offered by dominant commercial cultural forces. Some examples generated had slightly garbled ‘iStock’ watermarks on them, for example. As Hito Steyerl argues, the ‘invitation’ for artists to use AI can be seen as a form of onboarding for commercial entities. (Brown, 2023)

The contextual underpinning of this graphic work is created through the listing of the texts used to generate the imagery at the end of the comic/graphic novel to contextualise the use of AI for the project. Furthermore, the video work contains glitches produced by the generation of moving graphic forms, making visible the processes used in its creation.

**Emergency Staff Meeting**

This particular script episode,**'***Emergency Staff Meeting****,'***is centered on the relationship between three members of the Fine Art staff and the Dean of the School, who has previously been a Fine Art academic but is now in a management position. The familiarity that this creates allows for the comments by academics to be more confident in their language and approach (often reserved for academics outside of precarious post-92 Universities). The context of the meeting will become increasingly familiar to most academics as the pressures of dominant neoliberal policies force universities to manage economic instability in drastic ways.

The dialogue acknowledges the reality of the precarious positions that post-92 institutions find themselves in within a neoliberal, marketized education sector. The finances of institutions are tied to recruitment, which in turn is tied to the ability to market the value/quality of the education provided. A further set of artworks is designed to be displayed on university campuses or via web-based news bulletins, satirising the promotional messaging that universities must engage with in relation to marketisation. Akin to the fermentation of gossip in workplace corridors, ‘*Rumours’ is* a series of short ‘Infomercial’ presentation slides that purport to present university news updates. The form is disrupted by an over-reaching sense of institutional ‘transparency’, a term often used in neoliberal contexts and met with distrust. Promotional campaigns and forms of public messaging dominate current university activity, alongside a significant amount of effort spent managing the processes behind the publication of external performance metrics (such as the NSS and league tables).

From an academic perspective, the system is focused, therefore, not on the quality of the education being offered (and the time allowed to undertake that task), but on ensuring that the public perception of this is positive (as marketisation dictates). The impact that the increase in workloads of a reduced number of academic staff (through forms of restructuring) has on the quality of education is hard to argue against. However, this is deemed either an unfortunate consequence of marketisation or, at worst, considered inconsequential to a business model whose success is not dependent on it. For managers or executives with academic backgrounds, this is necessary but disheartening. For those members of executive groups and managers who have been employed in previous roles in the private sector, this will be negligible, at least in the short term, as their role prioritizes economic success.

One marked evidence of the impact of marketization within the academy is the influence of business lexicons on everyday university life. The script references this through the Dean’s use of language, which is indicative of his having now moved into management circles, where the use of this type of language is considered professional. There is a tension here, particularly for those academics who have transitioned this movement into management, expecting to utilize this vocabulary, yet with an awareness that it acknowledges the neoliberal dominance of the sector. In a vernacular sense, it is awkward and clunky. It is important to say that there is a counterpoint to the Dean’s use of language and behaviour in the artworks, which highlights the impact on the behaviour of academics, as a result of this same impact.

Academics certainly still understand the role of the academy in fostering critical discourse on social, cultural, and political issues, and the dominance of neoliberalism over all of these aspects requires such critique. For academics, then, the fact that these forces control the academy inevitably means that this critique implicates their own institutions.

Brown, K. (ed.) (2023) *Hito Steyerl on why NFTs and A.I. image generators are*

*really just ‘Onboarding tools’ for tech*

*conglomerates*. [https://news.artnet.com/artworld/these](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/these-renderings-do-not-relate-to-reality-hito-steyerl-on-the-ideologies-embedded-in-a-i-image-generators-2264692)

[renderings-do-not-relate-to-reality-hito-steyerl-on-the-ideologies-embedded-in-a-i](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/these-renderings-do-not-relate-to-reality-hito-steyerl-on-the-ideologies-embedded-in-a-i-image-generators-2264692)

[image-generators-2264692.](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/these-renderings-do-not-relate-to-reality-hito-steyerl-on-the-ideologies-embedded-in-a-i-image-generators-2264692)

Ellis, Carolyn, et al. “Autoethnography: An Overview.” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 36, no. 4 (138), 2011, pp. 273–90.

Furedi, F. (2011). Introduction to the marketisation of higher education and the student as consumer. In: M. Molesworth, R. Scullion and E. Nixon, eds., *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer*. London: Routledge, pp.1–8.

Harry H. Jiang, Lauren Brown, Jessica Cheng, Mehtab Khan, Abhishek Gupta, Deja Workman, Alex Hanna, Johnathan Flowers, and Timnit Gebru. 2023. AI Art and its Impact on Artists. In Proceedings of the 2023 AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society (AIES '23). Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 363–374. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3600211.3604681>

Nordensvärd, J. and Ketola, M. (2019) ‘Rethinking the Consumer Metaphor versus the Citizen Metaphor: Frame Merging and Higher Education Reform in Sweden’, *Social Policy and Society*, 18(4), pp. 555–575. doi:10.1017/S1474746418000465.