

# The strange death of the art school

Daisy Dunn

The standardisation of British art schools has replaced a once living tradition of artistic practice with self-justificatory faux-academese.



British visual artists (L-R) Angela Bulloch, Georgina Starr, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas and Gillian Wearing, who are part of the group known as the Young British Artists, photographed on 16th July, 1996. Credit: John Stoddart/Popperfoto via Getty Images.

There used to be a strong tradition of arts and crafts in Britain. Almost every county had its own art school, and every art school its own specialist practices. It wasn't unusual to walk into one in the 1970s and find etching in one corner and stained-glass window making in another. Art school was like a Renaissance *bottega* without the candlelight. You learned on the job, for a job, and failed better. Art theory was a natural part of the course rather than something imposed crudely on top of it.

But then everything changed. In 1986, seven of the leading London art schools [came together](#) to form the London Institute. In 2003/4, the Institute received university status, and Central Saint Martins, Camberwell, Chelsea, London College of Communication, London College of Fashion and Wimbledon College of Arts became the University of the Arts London (UAL). Similar umbrellas popped up elsewhere, [the University for the Creative Arts](#), for example, sheltering art schools in Surrey and Kent which had once operated independently. There is some parallel with institutions in Europe, such as the University of the Arts (ArtEZ) in the Netherlands, which is located across Arnhem, Enschede, and Zwolle.

Gaining university status was one of the worst things that could have happened to art schools. Out went practical, apprenticeship-style learning, and in came the need for endless self-justification. The faux-academese that began to creep in in the 1980s has intensified as universities clamour for government funding. It's easier to rank performance through written work – like that produced in traditional degrees – than anything as subjective as art. One measuring stick fits all.

Depressingly, there has been a gradual move away from the studio in the direction of the computer room. Students today typically have to write lengthy dissertations or manifestos justifying their concept for a piece before actually making it. The making, too, can be done on the computer – virtual rather than practical. There's a heavy steer towards jobs in art and fashion management and marketing.

As one tutor tells me, no student can honestly scrutinise their own work when they're having to assess how well it matches up to what they've written. It's not painting by numbers, more painting by words. The art itself is self-emulating rather than naturally evolving.

It's no coincidence that [the Young British Artists \(YBAs\)](#) – [Damien Hirst](#), [Tracey Emin](#), [Sarah Lucas](#) and the rest – emerged just as this transition was starting to take place. Conceptual art, like the new art school, privileges the justification over the outcome. With the YBAs continuing to claim gallery space (and big bucks), and their contemporaries still tutoring in many of the art schools, is it any wonder that students aspire to produce more of the same?

The saddest thing is that it's not going anywhere. Conceptual art was being made in Russia, Switzerland, and France at the beginning of last century, and better – just look at Malevich's [Black Square](#), and [Marcel Duchamp](#) and [Dadaism](#). It's hard not to dismiss much contemporary conceptual art as a watery reinvention of what was once so rigorous. Its persistence reeks of art schools jumping on the bandwagon for survival. Through their commercial success, the YBAs have inadvertently helped kill off the art school's best hopes of producing a new cohort to rival, as opposed simply to emulate, them.

What's more, conceptual art depends upon a firm foundation and this is being snatched from beneath students' feet. Traditionally, art students complete a pre-degree art foundation diploma, over the course of a year, which allows them to experiment in a variety of disciplines, such as drawing, graphics, 3D and product design, and acquire skills to carry forward. As well as helping future artists to decide which path to go down before paying full university fees, a foundation provides just that.

It is still going strong in Europe at various art schools including ECAL (École cantonale d'art de Lausanne) in Lausanne, Universität der Künste Berlin, and EnsAD (École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs) in Paris. There is even an art foundation course for international students at Syracuse Academy in Sicily.

But the course has been disappearing from art schools in England at an alarming rate. Falmouth – gone; Maidstone – gone; Epsom – going. Funding is tight, as foundation courses are categorised as further rather than higher education, and universities that run them cannot access the usual FE revenue streams. The replacement is a four-year degree course, which provides none of the diverse grounding of the original foundation.

The move has not proved popular with students or tutors. The announcement of cuts of 580 foundation course places and hundreds of staff across UAL in 2015 triggered student protests and even a sit-in; the university took legal action. The course was ultimately dropped at London College of Communication and amalgamated so that students at Chelsea and Wimbledon would have to go to Camberwell to take it.

The financial pressures on art departments are only squeezing creativity further. Last year, Goldsmiths, *alma mater* of Damien Hirst, [was declared in deficit of £8 million](#), necessitating expenditure cuts.

In Britain last month, it was confirmed that the subsidy from the Office for Students, regulator of higher education, [would be slashed by 50 per cent](#) for students of the arts. This comes as no surprise to anyone who remembers the girl in the ballet shoes on the [2020](#)

[government-backed poster](#) ('Fatima's next job could be in cyber'). The focus now, says the Department for Education, is to get more people working in jobs that support the NHS. A decent art or graphics department wouldn't go amiss either.

The real tragedy of all this is that it leaves art schools consuming themselves in a cycle of pseudo-intellectual twaddle peddled by the need to self-justify, while the money tree bends the other way. Today's art school is Tantalus caught knee-deep in a perfect conceptual storm. Add to that the fact that the number of arts subjects being taken at GCSE [fell by 35 per cent between 2010 and 2018](#), and the immediate future of modern art looks bleak. The gallery with nothing in it is about to get even emptier.

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