

## Hotel California

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**ABSTRAKT:** Niniejszy esej przedstawia szkoły artystyczne w Wielkiej Brytanii jako instytucje kierujące się wyłącznie imperatywem przetrwania. Podważa warunki i ideologię, w których szkoły artystyczne tworzyły pokolenia artystów od lat 70. XX wieku, oraz ich reakcję na ekonomiczne, społeczne i polityczne napięcia ostatniej dekady. Tekst przedstawia porównanie między obecną ekspansją w szkoleniu psychoterapeutów – dzisiejszych kognitywistów przyszłości – a społecznie pozytywnymi motywacjami ekspansji szkoły artystycznej. Sugeruje, że szkoła artystyczna, która nie zdołała się przekształcić i jest mało użyteczna dla swoich społeczeństw, stanie przed koniecznością konkurowania z innymi, bardziej jawnie instrumentalnymi dyscyplinami poznawczymi. Wolność, którą te ostatnie obiecują, będzie jednak tak krótkotrwała jak masowa edukacja artystyczna.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** szkoła artystyczna, terapia, instrumentalizacja, trening, praxis, przemysł kreatywny

**PIERRE D'ALANCAISEZ** jest krytykiem sztuki, kuratorem i badaczem zajmującym się wieloraką polityką sztuki. W 2024 roku współtworzył Verdurin, przestrzeń do eksperymentów w zakresie estetyki, nauki i trudnych rozmów, które napędzają dzisiejszą kulturę. Wcześniej kierował Waterside Contemporary, galerią, która testowała kwestie społeczne i polityczne na rynku sztuki. Przed rozpoczęciem praktyki artystycznej kształcił się w zakresie nauk ścisłych, pracował również nad strategiami wymiany kulturalnej i zaangażowania w szkolnictwie wyższym i sektorze charytatywnym, a także zajmował stanowiska kierownicze w wydawnictwach i usługach finansowych

**ABSTRACT:** This essay describes the art schools in the UK as institutions driven solely by an imperative to survive. It challenges the conditions and the ideology under which art schools created generations of artists since the 1970s and their reaction to the economic, social, and political upheavals of the past decade. The text makes a comparison between the current expansion in the training of psychotherapists – today's cognitive professionals of the future – and the socially positive motivations for the expansion of art schools. The text suggests that having failed to transform itself and being of little practical use to societies, art schools will face competition from other, more overtly instrumental cognitive disciplines. The freedom which they promise, however, will be as short-lived as that of mass art education.

**KEY WORDS:** art school, therapy, instrumentalisation, training, praxis, creative industries

**PIERRE D'ALANCAISEZ** is a art critic, curator, and researcher working with the multiple politics of the arts. In 2024, he co-founded Verdurin, a space for experimentation in aesthetics, learning, and the difficult conversations which drive today's culture. He previously directed Waterside Contemporary, a gallery that tested social and political questions in the art market. Having trained in the sciences before coming to artistic practice, Pierre also worked on cultural exchange and engagement strategies in higher education and the charity sector and has held senior positions in publishing and financial services.



Pierre d'Alancaisez  
**ART SCHOOL HOTEL  
CALIFORNIA**

## A second chance

My friend Daniel changed careers in his mid-forties. Noticing early signs of burnout, he decided to head back to school. Such moves aren't unusual in the age of portfolio careers. Daniel is now training to become a psychotherapist. He is looking forward to spending a couple of decades engaging in the emotional and intellectual lives of others.

It's touching to see Daniel taking this opportunity to start again and seek satisfaction in what is perfectly compatible with his mature interests. His training in individual-centred therapy is presented as pursuit of the practitioner's self-update to the extent that one may almost forget that the collapse in stable employment patterns and the precarity of Daniel's earlier career are what pushed him to search for a new profession and a new meaning.

It has, however, been less charming to follow the story of Daniel's training and his developing understanding of his new chosen profession. In the three years of his study, Daniel has learnt that his idea of therapeutic theory, gleamed from reading bits of Carl Rogers and a visit to Freud Museum, has little to do with practice. Psychotherapeutic work, it turns out, is subject to severe market stress. A mental health crisis is ripping through the Western world, and demand for therapy is soaring. Yet, the UK's public health service allocates hardly any funds to psychotherapy. Administration of solace to needful minds will thus be a battle with institutions and banks for Daniel. Even his schooling mirrors this supply-and-demand compromise. Daniel's training placements are poorly organised and their extent inadequate to the professional's task.

All this is only the stuff of 'Professional Practice 101'. The true challenge Daniel will face is that of praxis. In the consulting rooms, the reality of mending broken souls is often far from the textbook's promise. The theories and techniques which Daniel is diligently learning today will prove inadequate to cope with the challenge. Treatment protocols cut down to the bone can barely skim the mind's surface. Some of the patients Daniel will see will be in a state of such acute distress that psychotherapy will do nothing to alleviate their suffering caused by, for example, poverty or abusive personal relationships. Providing care in such circumstances for which Daniel is training is sometimes damaging to the patient. Perversely, Daniel and his fellow students are instructed to suppress their caring impulse lest it interferes with the performance. Even in the simulated consulting room of the school, psychotherapy fails to deliver its promise.

Daniel's age and life experience help him to internalise these issues in the course of his training. But to an external observer or, indeed, younger students, therapy school might look like a swindle. Theory lectures brimming with lofty ideas that most 18-year-olds struggle to under-

stand are mixed with practical sessions that reveal them to be lacking. The therapy which students are obliged to receive, likewise, cuts corners and comes nowhere near the depths promised in the seminar room. The ideal patient-therapist relationship permeates the programme but nowhere can it be experienced.

The school hears the student's doubts and turns them into content. In time, lecturers admit that they too have little faith in their practice. But because the trainees come to understand this only after they have used up their student loans, nothing comes of their realisation. The programme both inspires and disillusion students, preparing most of them for poorly paid gig work in underfunded clinics or, worse, at *betterhelp.com*.

Daniel, like most of his fellow trainees, is jaded but undeterred. He believes in doing right by his patients and, indeed, by himself. But he sees the reality of the field and complains about it vocally. As does everybody else on his course. As does every practising therapist. The intellectual and practical trade-offs are wearisome, but each professional is compelled by the 'system' – that unholy alliance of theory, good will, and circumstance – to keep going.

One could legitimately ask if the existing practice of clinical psychotherapy is a net positive in the world. That question, however, is unconscionable to an instructor charged with building the discipline's future. Instilled with the right ideas, every graduate becomes an ambassador for their profession. An individual psychotherapist might admit that what they practice is such a perversion of the principles that it simply cannot work. Even then, however, they couldn't imagine closing down clinics or schools which produce such disastrous results. Instead, they call for more funds, more training and a world which more closely resembles the ideal consulting room of Carl Rogers' texts.

### **Doomed to succeed**

In this sketch, psychotherapy is faulty but is nonetheless doomed to succeed. The perceived demand for therapeutic services is too great to question. The impulse for the good which motivates young trainees, likewise, is too valuable to cut at the root. This practice builds institutions in which reality colonise principles even when everyone involved tries their best not to let them. New practices intent on reforming the field emerge and develop new theories. They eventually turn out to be as corruptible as their predecessors. The Covid pandemic, for example, occasioned panicked innovation in online treatment protocols that don't work but remain the norm years later because they are cheaper.

This story is meant as a metaphor and I'm hoping that you, the reader, will recognise your own training in it. That is likely to have been at an art school, so I know that you will assess the problems of Daniel's

training critically. You will remember that strange mixture of cerebral stimulation, instinctive fascination and a compelling promise of unalienated work that made you forget the difference between a hobby, a job, a calling and a vocation. You may recall feeling excited when critical fads like institutional critique of the early 2000s or this decade's institutional decolonisation swept through art schools. You may even remember realising that the best way to right the wrongs addressed by Andrea Fraser<sup>1</sup> or Walter D. Mignolo<sup>2</sup> might be to shut art schools down altogether. Despite this, you today believe that the world needs more artists.

Daniel wants to fill the town with therapists, too. Like a seasoned psychotherapist, you would rather not ask if your art school and the thousands of careers it set in motion have been a net positive to the world. These parallels are clear, you'll reason, but art must be exempt from utilitarian considerations. Adorno and Horkheimer<sup>3</sup> were right in their critique of the cultural industry's expansion drive, but art is a special case! The question is so crass, one'd have to go to an art school to understand why. If theory and practice have parted ways in art, it must be because the reality has changed. You'll recognise Daniel's image of the school as a capitalist monster, but your mind will wander to the hope, potential and desperate need for art in today's world. We can't all go to therapy, so new generations of artists are society's best bet.

I'm telling you this story, reader, because Daniel's career change comes after twenty-five years he spent as an art worker. I have known him for most of this time and our toils in the art world have shared many highs and lows. I thus understand why, at 45, Daniel sought a way out. It gives me little solace, however, to think that his new pursuit will be no different from the last.

What is midlife crisis if not an opportunity to correct your earlier mistakes? The greatest joke in Daniel's story is the art school he attended over twenty years ago. This once illustrious institution in his native South American country went bust, nullifying his degree in the process. To his undoing, Daniel became eligible for a new state-backed student loan in the UK. It's ironic that under the circumstances he didn't opt to go to art school the second time round.

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- 1 Andrea Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', *Artforum International*, 2005, pp. 278–283.
  - 2 Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, 'Decolonial Options and Artistic/aesthetic Entanglements: An Interview with Walter Mignolo', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 1 (2014), pp. 196–212.
  - 3 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2002).

I've embellished this story a little. Daniel is an amalgam of several acquaintances who tried to exit the art world but ended close to where they started. An artist shaped by the art school industrial complex cannot ever escape its logic, he merely substitutes it for another. This could be testament to a certain reverence for art schools instilled in the alumni. More likely, it is the result of self-preservation paralysis.

That psychotherapy is downstream from art, at least outside the USA, is no accident. After the mass deployment of art schooling has failed to produce healthy, productive societies, the overt interventionism of therapy is the natural next step on the treadmill of cognitive economy. The therapy world happens to make the dissonance between its purpose and means more readily apparent. The contradictions and compromises of marrying world-changing theory and impractical practice at an industrial scale which are so stark in therapy, are outright taboo in the art world.

### **No honourable answer**

There is no honourable answer to the question of what artists are for in a late neoliberal society. In the past few decades, art schools have fashioned a variety of hats for the ever-growing armies of graduates. In the post-1997 world of New Labour's 'Cool Britannia', for example, artists became agents of creative economy. According to David Hesmondhalgh, the revolutionary idea of that period's "policy vacuum" was to train youth in new creative and knowledge-based professions such as video production, software or telecoms in the hope that a supply of talent would bring the industries themselves to the UK.<sup>4</sup>

There was no obvious reason why art schools should be trusted to train app developers. Nicholas Garnham described the "art college lobby" effectively pulling the wool over the Blair government's eyes and winning the nation's career development franchise by faking its credentials.<sup>5</sup> Britain's economy was crying for telecoms executives. It got conceptual artists instead, each certified with impractical but transferrable skills. In the age of mindless entrepreneurialism, "the MFA was the new MBA"<sup>6</sup> and nobody thought of the legions of underemployed art grads.

The oversupply of talent – I'm using the term with a certain amount of sarcasm – created other opportunities for career speculation.

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4 David Hesmondhalgh et al., *Culture, Economy and Politics: The Case of New Labour* (Springer, 2015).

5 Nicholas Garnham, 'From Cultural to Creative Industries: An Analysis of the Implications of the "Creative Industries" Approach to Arts and Media Policy Making in the United Kingdom', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 11, no. 1 (2005): 15–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286630500067606>.

6 Katherine Bell, 'The MFA Is the New MBA', *Harvard Business Review Online* (blog), 14 April 2008, <https://hbr.org/2008/04/the-mfa-is-the-new-mba>.

Because therapists are also trained critical thinkers, they are charged with developing a solution to the problems they inadvertently perpetuate. When they fail, they are enthralled to renew their commitment to the dogma through further education. Training in the mental health professions is thus a growth area.

The theoretical fashion for social practice foregrounded the notion that artists could save the world with creative empathy. The UK's public art landscape of the 2000s was full of projects like community mural-making and symbolic interventions in deprived communities. As Eleonor Belfiore highlighted, however, sending artists into social work with no training and no resources was at best irresponsible.<sup>7</sup> By the time the economic austerity of the 2010s tore arts budgets to shreds, it was the hordes of social artists who needed empathy and creative salvation.

This contradiction mirrors Daniel's experience of psychotherapy which asks the practitioner to work miracles with means so limited that he himself needs help. Because therapists are also trained critical thinkers, they are charged with developing a solution to the problems they inadvertently perpetuate. When they fail, they are enthralled to renew their commitment to the dogma through further education. Training in the mental health professions is thus a growth area. Likewise, numerous university courses are offered today which combine fields such as photography or sculpture with social art practice or even social justice. Neither discipline can adequately explain how its currently manifest failures might be practically ameliorated before the next batch of trainees reaches retirement age.

Art schools are thus a racket. Their survival relies on training new cadets for the front line, and then luring them back with an opportunity to repair, rethink and retrain when they have become bruised, poor and disenchanted. This factory process ensures that the troops never question the value of their service. It creates subjects who are so disempowered that they cannot imagine themselves outside the system which damages them so brutally.

What is crucial here is that this army cannot be reformed. Art schools are the supply chain of art's failing institutions, and the first step in the institutionalisation of its workforce. When fads critical of the establishment emerge periodically, they invariably end up demanding expansion of the art world. This impulse is so knee-jerk that even "Culture is Bad for You", a 2020 book by three of the UK's leading cultural industry scholars<sup>8</sup> which tracks the broken lives of cultural workers, argued against its title providing the solution to the industry's woes in the form of growth.

Whether it's to atone for art schools' poor record with disadvantaged students (UK art schools have been slower to diversify their registers than

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7 Eleonora Belfiore, 'Who Cares? At What Price? The Hidden Costs of Socially Engaged Arts Labour and the Moral Failure of Cultural Policy', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420982863>.

8 O Brook, D O'Brien, and M Taylor, *Culture Is Bad for You: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

any other faculty), to complain that a degree in fine art decreases a student's lifetime earnings,<sup>9</sup> or even to acknowledge that social practice does no-one any good,<sup>10</sup> art schools' only answer is to make more artists. The relationship between supply, demand and the quality of art is a foregone conclusion. Yet, the paradox is well known, and the circularity of its logic is obvious.<sup>11</sup> To question it openly, however, is tantamount to violent assault.

### A violent assault

Art schools are under attack. In 2021, the UK's Conservative government began redirecting art education funding towards training doctors and nurses.<sup>12</sup> Universities are reorganising their priorities accordingly, and fine art courses have begun to close. Artistic formation will likely once again become a bourgeois pursuit as it was until the 1970s and art schools' talk of diversity will have been for nothing. To the many thousands of art lecturers and tutors who are already struggling with declining employment standards, the political dictate must feel personal. Indeed, art schools brim with anti-Tory sentiment and, as far as the law allows it, a degree in fine arts includes instruction on how to vote.<sup>13</sup> The new Labour government is unlikely to reverse the funding trend. It has, however, committed to scrapping legislation intended to protect the academic freedom of scholars and the political neutrality of universities.

This is a closed-loop system. Arriving at an art school, undergraduates discover that the institution is nearing collapse. A private drink with a tutor might reveal that the art world's curse and the art school's losing battle with capitalist managerialism is largely of its own making. On the syllabus, however, the villains are white supremacy, colonialism,

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9 Jack Britton et al., 'Earnings Returns to Postgraduate Degrees in the UK' (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 16 September 2020), <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/earnings-returns-postgraduate-degrees-uk>.

10 Eleonora Belfiore, 'Art as a Means of Alleviating Social Exclusion: Does It Really Work? A Critique of Instrumental Cultural Policies and Social Impact Studies in the UK', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 8, no. 1 (2002): 91–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/102866302900324658>.

11 See, for example, Katrine Hjelde, 'Paradox and Potential: Fine Art Employability and Enterprise Perspectives', *Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education* 14, no. 2 (2015): 175–88, [https://doi.org/10.1386/adch.14.2.175\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/adch.14.2.175_1).

12 Gavin Williamson and Department for Education, 'Guidance to the Office for Students – Allocation of the Higher Education Teaching Grant Funding in the 2021–22 Financial Year' (Office for Students, 19 January 2021).

13 There is no research on the political bias of the art school. See, however, publications like Remi Adekoya, Eric Kaufmann, and Thomas Simpson, *Academic Freedom in the UK* (London: Policy Exchange, 2020), <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/academic-freedom-in-the-uk-2/>.

populism or even the elected government. Art schools absorb self-selecting, hopeful young minds and turn them into guerillas fighting a protozoic disease which they perceive as windmills. For some, no doubt, the struggles are real and the loss materially experienced. For many, however, the defence of the art institution will become a hobby stoked by misattributed threats.

The mechanisms which inform the art schools' collective policies emerged over several decades. The art world's activist consciousness may be traced to 1970 when the New York *Art Workers Coalition* demanded that institutions like The Met oppose US intervention in Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> A political creed became a prerequisite for entering the art world. As art schools lost interest in aesthetics and as the importance of skill and craft waned,<sup>15</sup> instantiating such policies became the institution's key function.

But the 1970 art strike didn't work, and neither did the one opposing the inauguration of Donald Trump in 2017.<sup>16</sup> The 2015 electoral success of *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* in Poland gave rise to a hysterical resistance by art world activists<sup>17</sup> that today characterises many Western art school campuses. For all the screeching of my London art world colleagues who lectured their students that Brexit voters were "scum", they lost that campaign, too. So much for the pedagogy of the oppressed.<sup>18</sup>

Against such pronounced failure, the art schools' political tool of last resort is outright exclusion. By decree or by social ostracism, there is no space for political dissent in those organisations, membership of which depends on students and staff alike signing up to an ever-expanding list of progressive political tenets. It was impossible, for example, to get a BFA in 2021 without declaring oneself antiracist.<sup>19</sup> In 2022, attendees of a life drawing class would be compelled to affirm trans women as women.<sup>20</sup> In today's art theory seminars, declaring support for

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14 Samuel J. Redman, *The Museum: A Short History of Crisis and Resilience* (New York: New York University Press, 2022).

15 John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London; New York: Verso, 2007).

16 'J20 Art Strike', accessed 27 February 2024, <http://www.j20artstrike.org/>.

17 Pierre d'Alancaisez, 'How to Lose a Culture War', *The Critic*, 5 March 2023, <https://thecritic.co.uk/how-to-lose-a-culture-war/>.

18 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Tenth printing, A Continuum Book (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974).

19 See, for example: UAL, 'Our 10-Point Anti-Racism Action Plan', UAL, 3 February 2021, <https://www.arts.ac.uk/about-ual/press-office/stories/uals-10-point-anti-racism-action-plan>.

20 'Trans-Inclusive Culture: Guidance on Advancing Trans Inclusion for Museums, Galleries, Archives and Heritage Organisations | Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG)', University of Leicester, accessed 29 September 2024, <https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/trans-inclusive-culture>.

Palestine is a ritual right out of Mao's cultural revolution. That, at least, has caused university managers some headaches.

It's not the nature of these ideas but their universal adoption that is bothersome. These attitudes are thought by the art world commentariat to be the outcomes of critical thought and careful collective deliberation. Are they? Stories of instructors being 'cancelled' for wrongthink are not infrequent but still rare in art schools compared with other disciplines, suggesting a startling ideological uniformity prevalent within these institutions. Such outward unity of attitudes and ideas hinges on unimaginable levels of self-censorship.<sup>21</sup>

These internal battles distract students and their instructors from the true challenges of their field, not least contemporary art's aesthetic crisis or that "creatives" are card-carrying members of the loathsome professional-managerial class.<sup>22</sup> At their best, art schools produce clones of Don Quixote, embattled and set *contra mundum* already at graduation. Their diplomas pronounce them model communicators and critical thinkers. Their aesthetic practices, however, repel the uninitiated and their thought fails politically outside its echo chamber.

### Lament

This is lamentable because art schools were the last bastion of free thought. Writing in 2015, Chris Kraus attributed the continuing popularity of art school degrees to the stifling political and ideological capture of other professions.<sup>23</sup> Young people chose art over architecture or the law because even those once fulfilling practices turned into rote. One could imagine a profession like psychotherapy functioning soullessly but efficiently without dissent or innovation. But such a state would be anathema to art.

It is a compelling question whether art ever did deliver that freedom. A 1970s series of works by the Argentinian artist Horacio Zabala which depicted museum, gallery, and artist studio rooms as prisons under the repeating slogan "Art is a Jail" suggests otherwise. Yet, until only

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21 Julia Farrington, 'Tackling Self-Censorship in the Arts Community', Index on Censorship, 16 May 2016, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2016/05/julia-farrington-challenges-to-artistic-freedom/>; Ruth Comeford, 'Culture of Self-Censorship in the Arts Revealed by Survey', *The Stage*, accessed 29 September 2024, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/culture-of-self-censorship-in-the-arts-revealed-by-survey>.

22 Pierre d'Alancaisez, 'The Discreet Charm of the Artistic Elite', *Petitpoi.Net* (blog), 25 March 2022, <https://petitpoi.net/the-discreet-charm-of-the-artistic-elite/>.

23 Chris Kraus, 'Ambiguous Virtues of Art School', *Artspace*, 2 March 2015, [https://www.artspace.com/magazine/news\\_events/book\\_report/chris-kraus-akademie-x-52660](https://www.artspace.com/magazine/news_events/book_report/chris-kraus-akademie-x-52660).

decades ago, nobody compelled young people en masse to become artists. The pursuit was on the one hand synonymous with bourgeois privilege and on the other with sacrifice and mythically glamourised bohemianism. The trade-offs were clear.

Today, art is an industrial calling. Governments and universities process freedom seekers by the thousand, equipping them for careers with sub-par working conditions with an identikit political consciousness and a reading list that would make anyone disgruntled. If this leaves any freedom, it's certainly not for art.

Daniel told me that he has been following the work of the Canadian clinical psychologist Jordan B. Peterson. Peterson is demonised by liberals as an icon of the alt-right. Daniel, however, finds much interest in Peterson's cultural critiques, and even more in his work on neuropsychology. So far, Daniel hasn't felt the need to hide his interest from his therapy school colleagues. One can only imagine what ostracism he'd experience if he made a similar admission in a practice-based art PhD.

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