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## Experiments in Autonomous Art Education in the UK, 2010-Present

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**ABSTRACT – Experiments in Autonomous Art Education in the UK, 2010-Present.** This paper critically surveys and contextualises the recent wave of autonomous art schools established in the UK since the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding & Student Finance, or Browne Review. It argues that these institutions have been formed as a direct response to this economic policy and the broader neoliberal economisation of higher education. By drawing upon the work of the Edu-Factory Collective, and the Autonomist Marxist theory that inspired their project, this paper argues that these new alternative art schools can be understood as ‘common autonomous institutions’. Furthermore, that they represent genuinely viable alternatives to the commodified, financialised, and marketised state provision. Finally, drawing upon the work of Santos, three alternative art schools (The Other MA, Southend, UK; The School of the Damned, London, UK; @.ac, UK) are analysed as nascent forms of the polyphonic pluriversity. **Keywords: New Alternative Art Schools. Neoliberalism. Marxism. Polyphonic Pluriversity.**

**RESUMO – Experiências em Ensino Autônomo de Artes no Reino Unido, 2010-até o presente.** Este artigo examina e contextualiza criticamente a recente onda de escolas de arte autônomas fundadas no Reino Unido a partir da *Independent Review of Higher Education Funding & Student Finance*, ou revisão Browne. Discute que estas instituições foram constituídas como uma resposta direta a esta política econômica e à economização neoliberal mais ampla do ensino superior. Com base no trabalho do *Edu-Factory Collective* e na teoria marxista autonomista que inspirou seu projeto, este artigo discute que estas novas escolas de arte alternativas podem ser compreendidas como *instituições autônomas comuns*. Além disso, que representam alternativas genuinamente viáveis à prestação estatal mercantilizada, monetarizada e comercializada. Finalmente, com base no trabalho de Santos, são analisadas três escolas de arte alternativas (*The Other MA*, Southend, Reino Unido; *The School of the Damned*, Londres, Reino Unido; *@.ac*, Reino Unido) como formas nascentes da pluriversidade polifônica. **Palavras-chave: Novas Escolas de arte alternativas. Neoliberalismo. Marxismo. Pluriversidade Polifônica.**

## Introduction

This paper critically surveys and contextualises the recent wave of autonomous art schools established in the UK since the *Independent Review of Higher Education Funding & Student Finance*, or Browne Review (Department for Business, Innovation, and Skill [DBIS], 2010). This review proposed numerous reforms to higher education funding, which was argued to be financially unsustainable. Following the review, state sponsored student grants were replaced by student loans, and block grants from the state to universities were phased out. ‘Priority subjects’ such as science, technology, engineering, and maths [STEM] retained some state funding. There are currently proposals to divest up to 50% of current funding away from HE arts courses towards the science and technology courses deemed more economically productive (Harris, 2021). To compensate for decreased income, institutions were allowed to treble undergraduate tuition fees, initially to £9,000 p.a. The fees cap has risen with inflation to £9,250 (US\$12,815) p.a. for home / EU students. Institutions have now become almost entirely dependent on these increased tuition fees, especially those of the lucrative overseas student market, for which institutions can charge anything up to £38,000 (US\$52,600) p.a. or up to £61,435 (US\$85,058) for medical degrees. Over-investment in signature buildings and capital expansion projects during a brief post-Browne boom period has left many universities co-dependent with the inflated fees regime, meaning that a reduction to pre-2010 fees levels is unlikely, as well as politically toxic. The then leader of the opposition, Jeremy Corbyn MP, was publicly ridiculed for suggesting, as part of his 2017 election campaign, that the current fees regime should be abolished, and that student debt may have to be written off (Ferguson 2017; cf. Full Fact, 2017). Nevertheless, tuition fees remain currently frozen due to political pressure on the current Conservative government. These pressures are both external, from student campaign groups and political opponents (HC Deb, 2020), and internal, from the Government’s own Treasury who are seriously questioning the long-term sustainability of the student loan system (Morgan, 2021b). The recent COVID-19 crisis, which resulted in the wholesale cancellation of face-to-face university teaching, has amplified pressures from both sides (HC Deb 2020). The Department for Education’s recently published ‘Post-18 Review of Education and Funding’, or Augar Review (2019), contains proposals for either a blanket reduction in the fees cap to £6,500 p.a., differential fees based on the quality of provision, or a negative grant for ‘low-value’ courses (Augar Review, 2019, p. 135). The controversy of these proposals, coupled with a change of Prime Minister and Education Secretary since the review was commissioned, may mean that the Augar recommendations are perennially delayed or simply ignored (Morgan, 2021a).

In direct response to the Browne Review reforms, numerous autonomous, student-driven, and completely free, art schools have been established since 2010. Some of these institutions exist solely to provide access to higher education in the arts to those who can no longer af-

ford tuition fees. Others model themselves as an explicit ‘subversion of the current monetary corruption of the educational system’ (School of the Damned, 2015). Many have established themselves as legitimate alternatives to the neoliberal academy. The prestigious New Contemporaries exhibition<sup>1</sup>, regarded as one of the key platforms for the best graduate artists, now recognises alternative art school programmes as the equivalent of mainstream provision when assessing student competition entries. Most of these experimental institutions have a web presence, through which an assemblage of alternative provision is gradually becoming established, alongside an ad-hoc digital archive of critical arts pedagogy. However, these organisations lack a formal network or structure. A planned ‘Festival of Alternative Arts Education’, organised by the artist-researcher Sophia Kosmaoglou (2021a), aimed to facilitate knowledge exchange between alternative art schools and represented the first step towards organising these institutions into a network. Unfortunately, the event was postponed due to the coronavirus crisis. This paper builds upon Kosmaoglou’s work and represents the first attempt at mapping these experimental art schools in scholarly literature. Beyond documenting these institutions for historical records, this paper aims to highlight the political and pedagogical challenges they pose for mainstream higher education. Written for an international audience, this paper critically interprets these autonomous art schools through the lens of global theories of critical pedagogy. In particular, it draws upon the recent work of the Edu-Factory Collective (2009), especially their proposals for a ‘global autonomous university’. It also utilises Santos’ (2018) categories of the polyphonic university, the subversity, and the pluriversity to map the various alternative art school models. It is hoped that the mapping exercise contained within this paper can contribute to the organisation of this nascent multitude (Hardt; Negri, 2006) of alternative art educators, and to extend their voice beyond the UK. More generally, this paper is offered as a contribution to the worldwide university struggles and an attempt to aid the formation of the global autonomous university, or pluriversity.

## **The Economisation of UK Higher Education**

In the UK, higher education tuition fees were first introduced in 1998, under the centre-Left Labour government of Tony Blair. Then, students were asked to pay an up-front ‘top-up fee’ of £1,000 as a contribution to the costs of their education (Bolton; Hubble 2018). This figure was increased to £3,000 in 2006, under Blair’s reshuffled Labour government, and a system of deferred student loans was introduced. The UK student loan system differs from the US in that it remains income contingent, and students are only asked to make repayments when their income surpasses a specific threshold. This figure is currently £27,295 a year, £2,274 a month, or £524 a week (UCAS, 2021). The US ‘mortgage style’ loan system is based on fixed monthly repayments, meaning that repayment pressure increases with any fall in graduate income (Barr et al. 2019, p. 33). Though the ‘graduate tax’ style UK system is argu-

ably fairer for students, it also increases the likelihood of defaults. Currently, the outstanding student loan repayments are written off entirely after 30 years (Bolton and Hubble 2018: 4). Government estimates suggest that only 25% of current students will pay back their loans in full (Bolton, 2021). The student loan book is therefore an unsustainable and exponentially increasing public debt, effectively subsidised by the taxpayer. To address this problem, in December 2017 and December 2018, the Exchequer sold off two tranches of income contingent student loans to private investment companies (Bolton; Hubble 2020). Currently, proposals to change the favourable loan terms which students initially signed are being debated.

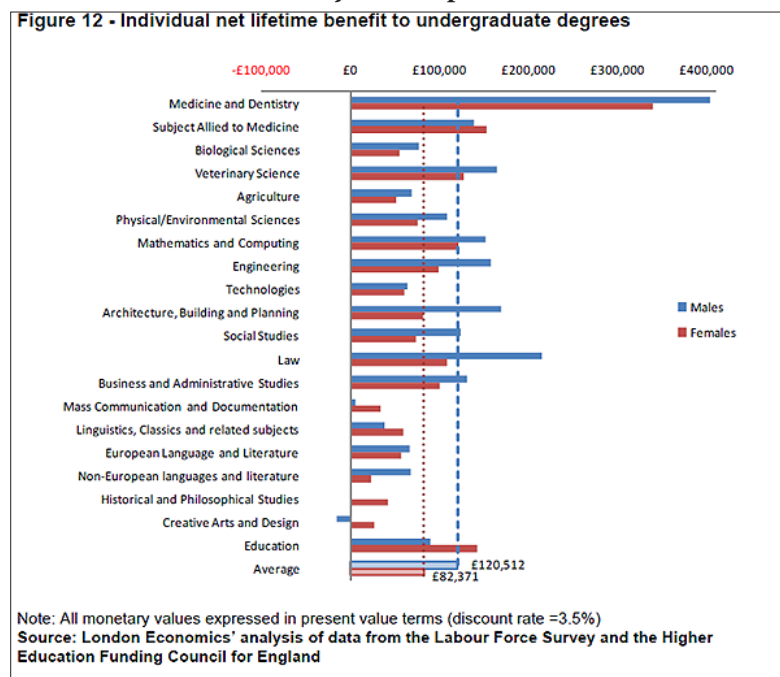
Barr (2016) has traced the economic logic of the student loan system back to the work of Milton Friedman (1945; 1955), particularly his theories of human capital investment. Friedman argued that state investment in human capital yielded greater economic returns than human capital. More so, that secondary and tertiary education represented a key form of such investment nationally. For Friedman, the choice between a taxpayer funded mass higher education system and an elite or selective one could be supplanted by a third way, which supplemented public with private finance. Friedman proposed that individuals might sell shares in their possible future income to offset the immediate costs of their training. This can be understood as the forerunner of the income contingent student loan (Barr, 2016, p. 442-43), which economic thinking figures as a private investment, leveraged against future earnings potential. In the UK, the post-Browne era has entrenched the ideology of higher education as a private human capital investment, rather than a public or social good. The headline fees increase disguised what McGettigan (2013, p. 3-5) described as a 'stealth experiment' in neoliberal educational reform. Alongside placing an increased financial burden on students, preventing access to the university for the economically disadvantaged, these reforms have accelerated the financialisation, marketisation, and commodification (McGettigan, 2013) of the UK university. These reforms can be regarded as neo-Friedmanite, designed not only to replace public with private funding, but also to allow new private-for-profit providers to enter the market. One evident consequence of this marketisation is that students are now broadly regarded as the consumers of education, and universities as consumer services. This has fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between universities, citizens, and the state.

For Wendy Brown (2015, p. 21-45), the 'economisation' of higher education has consequences beyond the university. By figuring society as the totality of competing human capitals, equality ceases to be the central principle of democracy and 'inequality becomes normal, even normative' (35). Furthermore, the emphasis on individual responsibility and prudent private investment deemphasises socio-political ideas of mutual aid, solidarity, the social contract, and collective conceptions of 'class, taking with it the analytic basis for alienation, exploitation, and association among labourers' (38). This 'economisation' transforms 'homo-academicus' and 'homo-politicus' into 'homo-oeconomicus'.

When everything is rendered in purely economic terms, ‘the foundation vanishes for citizenship concerned with public things and the common good’ (39).

The logic of economisation equally co-opts ‘homo-aestheticus’, and has already had noticeable effects on arts and humanities subjects in the UK. Deemed as national non-priority subjects, the divestment of funding has not only effectively privatised the country’s art school provision at a stroke (McQuillan, 2010) but generated a nascent culture war of the ilk Readings (1996, p. 89-118) recognised in the Reagan era US. Increasingly, arts and humanities subjects are labelled as poor value for money compared to those with more lucrative career paths. Both the Browne and Augar reviews employ this rhetoric, repeatedly using the signifier ‘priority courses’ to implicitly distinguish STEM courses worthy of limited continued support. Such discourses comprehend ‘value’ solely on the basis of projected graduate earnings (McGettigan, 2016). Arts subjects are especially judged as low ‘value for money’ because of the increased likelihood of arts students defaulting on their loan repayments. Figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies [IFS] suggest that arts graduates cost the taxpayer 30% more than engineering degrees (Busby, 2019). This negative discourse is resulting in a noticeable decline in take-up for arts and humanities subjects in comparison to other subjects (Woolcock, 2021; British Academy, 2018; O’Leary, 2018).

**Figure 1 – Projected UK graduate lifetime earnings, arranged by subject discipline**



Source: McGettigan (2016).

Recent reports from the Russell Group (2020; 2015), which represents the twenty-four most elite, and therefore most selective, universities in the UK outside of Oxford and Cambridge, recognise the persistent barriers to economised education for the socially disadvantaged. One finding is that increased financial pressures are disincentivising poorer students from choosing universities outside their hometowns. The future for such students is therefore determined by the provision of the local university. The removal of arts provision from provincial universities has an impact beyond the reduction of consumer choice. As Beck and Cornford (2014) have argued, this also represents the elimination of the subcultural and negational idea of the 'art school' in the civic imaginary. Beyond the removal of a major catalyst for local creative industries, the lost civic function of the art school can be understood as the absence of a critical 'challenge to the quotidian' (2014, p. 8).

This is merely one effect of what Jeffrey Williams has called 'the pedagogy of debt' (Williams in Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 89-96). Writing about the American model of higher education, which is arguably the most economised globally, he argues that debt based higher education instils a fear of failure. Driven by an acute anxiety about the financial consequences of bad university choices, this prevents risky course choices such as the arts. This 'fear of failure' is internalised as a lesson in career choices and what Mark Fisher (2009) has described as 'capitalist realism'. The former labels arts subjects as both bad investments and private indulgences for the bourgeois classes. The latter insists that 'nothing in life is anterior to the market' and that nothing in life comes for free (Williams in Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 95). Here, it is the implied civic responsibility of universities to provide economically productive courses and the civic duty of students to augment the hegemonic economic system by repaying their personal debts in a timely fashion. A worrying possibility raised by recent exchequer figures uncovered by McGettigan (2016) is that many arts graduates will never earn enough to pay their loans back. It is highly likely that steadily increasing loan defaults will force the government to deny arts students access to the loan book in future, or at least place strict institutional restrictions on student numbers.

Another consequence of the economisation of education is addressed by a recent report co-authored by the National Union of Students and the Universities UK group, who represent the former polytechnics within which the majority of UK art schools were incorporated from 1992 onwards. This report was entitled 'Breaking Down the Barriers to Student Opportunities and Youth Social Action' (2015). Its stated ambition was to explore how students could be encouraged to participate with their local communities through volunteering and other forms of community work. The aim is to ensure that UK higher education meets 'the needs of the wider community'. Here, volunteering is seen as a way for students to 'put something back to the area where they live and study'. This report insists on the centrality of the university to civil society:



The origins of higher education go back nearly a millennium; many universities were created by citizens, communities and their societies with a view to contributing to social and economic transformation and this civic role remains just as relevant today (NUS / UUK, 2015).

The paradox is that the economised university and its prohibitive fees structure burns the social bridges which it then suggests its students should rebuild through voluntary labour. Louis Althusser (1971, p. 162) famously argued that ideology can be defined as the imaginary relationship to the nevertheless real conditions of production. This fantasy of the social and community role of the university, above and beyond its economic-disciplinary function, is perfectly consistent with Althusser's analysis. Though he does not cite him by name, Williams' essay reprises Althusser by effectively arguing that the debt-driven university maintains hegemony as an 'ideological state apparatus' [ISA] (Althusser, 1971, p. 143).

### **Towards a Global Autonomous University**

Williams' essay was published within a volume of critical pedagogical works written under the nom de guerre of the Edu-Factory Collective (2009). This now-disbanded collective once numbered over 500 members. It originated within the debates of an internet message board, established to coordinate activists operating within global university struggles. Some of their membership participated in the Italian student protests against the neoliberal Gelmini reforms to Italian higher education. These protests gradually coalesced into the *Rete per l'Autoformazione* / Network for Self-Education. This group transformed an online protest movement, fomented within message boards moderated by precarious academics, into a formal programme of online autonomous self-education courses (Parar Bolonha, 2007).

This emphasis on autonomy and self-education evidence the extent to which the politics of *Autonomia* and *operaismo* underpin many of the Edu-Factory Collective's work. For the unfamiliar, *Autonomia* was an extra-parliamentary, post-Marxist, autonomist political movement, active in Italy in the late 1970s, which 'comprised almost entirely of intellectuals and young workers and unemployed youth' (Lotringer; Marazzi, 2007, p. v). *Autonomia* emerged as a splinter faction from blue collar militancy, as part of the more general Italian political movement called *operaismo* [workerism]. Like many of the movements emerging after the global uprisings of 1968, *Autonomia* rejected traditional forms of Communist political organisation, which were figured as repressive. Instead, it emphasised an experimental political culture based on rhizomatic organisation, spontaneity, and creativity. Workerism is now commonly employed as a pejorative against the leftist idealisation of the working class, such as in Soviet propaganda or socialist realist art. In Italy however, workerism had a different meaning, referring to the 'reorganization of working-class institutions toward direct demo-



cratic control' (Ryder, 2017). This strategy was intended to contribute to both working class consciousness raising and the more general democratisation of society from the bottom up. Rather than valorising work, workerists stood for the emancipation of workers from the drudgery of the production lines. The Italian workerist movement was theorised in the articles of two influential journals. Firstly, *Quaderni Rossi* [Red Notebooks] (1961-5), and secondly *Classe Operaia* [Working Class] (1963-6), both of which were founded by the autonomist Marxists Antonio Negri and Mario Tronti. One of the key concepts debated within both was Tronti's (2013 [1962]) concept of the 'social factory'. This argued that the tendency of the state to increasingly act as a concentrated, collective capitalist caused the logic of capitalist relations of production to permeate throughout all aspects of society. Here, 'all of social production is turned into industrial production' (Tronti, 2013 [1962]), and society is therefore akin to an all-encompassing social factory. A simple example would be the now naturalised description of contemporary arts sectors as 'creative industries' - a term which workerists would find oxymoronic. The economisation of the university into a private capitalist enterprise is another example.

The Edu-Factory Collective begin their work from the proposition that 'as once was the factory, so now is the university' (2009, p. 125). Their most important book, *Towards a Global Autonomous University* (2009), contains an afterword by Negri, co-authored by Judith Revel (172-1799). This essay defines the 'common autonomous institution (CAI) or a multitudinarian autonomous organization' (173). The CAI is an extension of the Autonomous Workers' Institutions [AWI] desired by workerists. AWIs can take many forms but are epitomised in the attempts to place factories under workers' control in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Key examples are the petrochemical plant at Porto Marghera, the Fiat factory in Turin, or the LIP watch factory in Besançon. AWIs are characterised by their autonomous political organisation, which is independent from leaders, bosses, or political parties. They also are identified by their capacity to grant a political voice to their actors. More importantly, their formation must be understood as a process 'of self-learning, moving from the bottom to the top' (Negri and Revel in Edu-Factory Collective 2009, p. 172). The CAI is an attempt to update the AWI concept for the contemporary epoch, which has shifted from Fordist factory production to a Post-Fordist system of immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996). Consequently, the CAI is 'founded on the new relational horizon (communicative, informatic etc.) that is characteristic of the new mode of production' (173). Like many forms of organic social organisation in the internet age, the CAI tends to be horizontally organised, networked, nomadic, 'expansive but also dissipating' (ibid). Importantly, CAIs resist normative political tendencies and the process of institutionalisation which transform horizontality into newly vertical structures of power. Born out of heterogeneous debates by activists within global university struggles, the Edu-Factory Collective represents an attempt to rebuild the university as a CAI. Their collective title

invites us to question whether it is 'possible to organize within the university as if it were a factory', but beyond the traditional and 'exhausted' forms of organised labour such as political parties (2009, p. 2). One sense of this post-political organisation is sketched by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten in their essay 'The University and the Undercommons' (Edu-Factory Collective 2009, p. 145-150). Though originally published in *Towards a Global Autonomous University*, this text would later become a chapter in Moten and Harney's influential book *The Undercommons* (2013). Harney and Moten (2013) argue that 'the only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one' (145). The titular undercommons refers to the subterranean spaces beneath the economised university where this criminality is gestated and organised. By criminality, Harney and Moten mean the reorientation of teaching away from the paradigm of commodification, and towards its 'social capacity'. The logic of economisation can only conceive of this reclamation in terms of waste, if not as outright stolen profit. For Harney and Moten, the social capacity of teaching can be understood as 'a collective orientation to the knowledge object as future project, and a commitment to what we want to call the prophetic organization' (146). Reframed in the language of 1960s autonomism, as well as manufacturing value for the knowledge factory, teaching also produces a shared intellectual process and rhizomatic social bonds. The 'beyond of teaching' (Edu-Factory Collective 2009, p. 147) is also 'the becoming common of labour' (Hardt; Negri, 2006, p. 103) and the embryonic forms of what Hardt and Negri call the multitude. In contradistinction from reductive and metapolitical conceptions of class, the 'multitude is an irreducible multiplicity; the singular social differences that constitute the multitude must always be expressed and can never be flattened into sameness, unity, identity, or indifference' (Hardt; Negri 2006, p. 105). Similarly, the university 'undercommons' represents a disidentification from the academy, its normative subjectivities, and hegemonic ideas of the 'value' of teaching. Against these, the undercommons foment 'the negligence of professionalization, and the professionalization of the critical academic' (Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 147).

Harney and Moten refer to the undercommons as 'maroon communities', deliberately weaponising the historical term used for the ad-hoc societies formed by escaped slaves. These maroon communities represent all the diverse subjectivities alienated from the neoliberal university. In his recent book on this subject, Hall (2018, p. 193-197) has identified whiteness and masculinity as toxic and hegemonic norms toward which the university interpellates all of its actors. For Hall (2018, p. 206), to refuse "[...] the movement of the academic commodity as a movement of the denial of human subjectivity" is also to emphasise the 'gendered, racialised and classed intersections' of the university subject. Similarly, amongst the multitudinous undercommons, Harney and Moten list 'mentorless graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, out or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments, closed-down film programs, visa-expired Yemeni student

news-paper editors, historically black college sociologists, and feminist engineers' (149). This list of intersectional subjectivities could be extended indefinitely. This work of deconstruction reasserts difference at the very point at which it is co-opted by the economised university into curriculum novelties or tokenism, all of which become cynically marketed as an enhanced student offer. Citing postcolonial voices like C. L. R. James and Stuart Hall, the British-Asian academics Nirmal Puwar and Sanjay Sharma's essay 'Short-Circuiting the Production of Knowledge' (Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 45-49) argues that the rhetoric of inclusion espoused by the neoliberal university disguises a form of cultural assimilation. For Puwar and Sharma, 'neoliberal education is embracing cultural difference for an ever-expanding multicultural capitalism' (46). Similarly, Aihwa Ong's essay 'Global Assemblages vs. Universalism' (Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 39-41) identifies a Euro-centric blind spot to black intersectionality within concepts of both the global university and activist notions of the commons (39). Against centripetal processes of assimilation, Harney and Moten's undercommons is a centrifugal space where a 'fugitive enlightenment enacts the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons (Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 147). To the potentially infinite list of aberrant intersectionalities above, for the purpose of this essay it is worth adding, at least, unemployable Fine Art graduates, practice-based arts researchers, and queer or BIPOC art historians.

The Edu-Factory Collective can be understood alternately as a platform for the undercommons, a CAI, or a nascent multitude. In their own words, it represented a mechanism for inculcating 'specific forms of resistance [to,] and the organization of escape routes' (1) from, the neoliberal university. It is 'a space where struggles connect, a space of [...] organizational experiments' (3). Here, research is understood not as the quantifiable outputs measured within research audits, but as partisan and subversive 'theoretical practice' (1), in the Althusserian (1965, p. 166-173) sense. The Edu-Factory Collective conceive teaching as a political praxis, not merely the affective labour of the service sectors of the knowledge factory. As their ironic title suggests, the Edu-Factory is simultaneously an acknowledgement of the degeneration of the university into an ISA within the social factory, but also a global resistance movement, beyond states and specific institutional powers. Readings (1996), who is repeatedly cited by the collective, argued that the ruination of the university must be understood as a consequence of both globalisation and the resulting absence of a unifying university ideal, beyond techno-bureaucratic concepts such as 'excellence'. Beyond economisation, the Edu-Factory Collective argue that 'the crisis of the university was determined by social movements in the first place (Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 1). These social movements, in the modern era at least, find their apogee in the global university struggles of 1968. Today, the university struggles have an increasingly postcolonial ac-

cent, evident in the 'Rhodes Must Fall' protests which began at Cape Town University, South Africa (2015), and spread to Oxford University, UK. Single issue protests such as these have now organically grown into collective calls to 'decolonise the university' (Grant; Price, 2020; Arday; Mirza, 2018). Following the cancellation of face-to-face teaching during the COVID, these intersectional struggles are increasingly organised alongside targeted rent strikes and fees boycotts, in an apparently growing multitude of student protest, similar to '68. Though they predate these events, many of the various instances of experimental self-education discussed throughout their book are directly produced within the struggles of university activist groups, many of which are decolonial voices from the global South.

These include the Vidya Ashram in Varanasi, India<sup>2</sup>, which is a communal retreat devoted to the development of indigenous *lokvidya* (people's knowledge). This is seen as a form of resistance to the 'economic exploitation' of knowledge by industrial society, and as a form of resistance against technocracy, scientism, and Western epistemological imperialism (Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 167). *Lokvidya* is the knowledge which either has no direct economic value for capitalists, or that which operates on the margins of the market, or the hidden labour which is nevertheless exploited as a surplus by capital. Examples of *lokvidya* include the domestic labour of women and the agrarian practices of indigenous tribes in remote villages. The Vidya Ashram is dedicated to providing a platform for developing such knowledges and disseminating them through public workshops, face to face teaching, youth camps, and other pedagogic activities designed to facilitate dialogue between educators, activists, and indigenous or peasant communities. Appropriating the term for Gandhi's campaign of nonviolent resistance against British colonialism, the Vidya Ashram regard their activity as a 'knowledge satyagraha' – a peaceful but counter-hegemonic form of non-cooperation with the economised white, Western Edu-Factory (169).

Published after the dissolution of the Edu-Factory collective, Santos' influential book *The End Of The Cognitive Empire* (2018) in many ways continues the global autonomous university project. He suggests four critical pedagogical models through which an emergent decolonial or counter-hegemonic university can be identified and understood: the committed university, the polyphonic university, the subversity, and the pluriversity. Taken in precisely this order, these conceptual categories describe a movement away from the university as Althusserian ISA and towards a university of Freirean liberation. The committed university is a political institution, devoted to a unifying political ideology. Such institutions can be, but are not automatically, emancipatory. These remain repressive if their overarching ideology becomes dogmatic or is followed uncritically. As implied by its name, the 'polyphonic university' would be attentive to a multitude of voices, which following Ong and Puwar, and Sharma (in Edu-Factory Collective, 2009), is not simply to say that this is an institution of diversity or multicultural inclusiv-

ity. Instead, the polyphonic university is 'composed of voices that are expressed in both conventional and nonconventional ways, both in diploma-oriented and non-diploma-oriented learning processes' (Santos, 2018, p. 277). Whilst the neoliberal university is increasingly paying lip-service towards polyphony in its range of access programmes, financial aid bursaries, and targeted recruitment drives, polyphony must be understood as a force which exceeds such instrumental strategies. For the economised university, diversity and inclusion must be understood primarily as the desire to search out new consumer markets to monopolise. A pluralisation of voices within the university is less likely than an assimilation of all voices and differences under one hegemonic mode of received pronunciation. Against this, Santos describes the genuinely polyphonic university:

(The) new polyphonic university will be a place where the ecologies of knowledges will find a home and where academics and citizens interested in fighting against cognitive capitalism, cognitive colonialism, and cognitive patriarchy will collaborate in bringing together different knowledges with full respect for their differences while also looking for convergences and articulations. Their purpose is to address issues that, in spite of having no market value, are socially, politically, and culturally relevant for communities of citizens and social groups. Will the noncommodified side of the university become a new type of popular university? Will it produce a new type of pluriversal knowledge in which artisanal knowledge will be taken more seriously and in which decolonial, *mestizo* knowledges will emerge? (Santos, 2018, p. 280).

Understood internally, polyphony is a force of difference, supplement, auto-critique, entryism, or the university's fifth column. As Harney and Moten recognise, artificial attempts to manufacture polyphony within the university, under the banner of liberal multiculturalism, might accidentally facilitate the development of a subversive 'undercommons of Enlightenment' (Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 146). However, another type of polyphonic university exists outside the academy, 'occupying the idea of a university and putting it to counter-hegemonic use' (Santos, 2018, p. 277). This type of polyphonic organisation is described as the 'subversity': a critical neologism which writes the experience of the subaltern into the actions of the subversive academic. The subversity is at once an act of writing back to the university, and of demolishing its ivory towers. The 'pluriversity' is the final stage of the decolonial emancipation of the university. Yet, it is nevertheless a product of identifiable battlegrounds within the contemporary university. Firstly, the tension between knowledge with and without market value (Santos, 2018, p. 278). Secondly, between what Santos terms 'abyssal' and 'postabyssal' research. Abyssal refers to the epistemologies of the North, postabyssal refers to those of the South. A key issue is the extent to which even the most subversive or anti-capitalist critical university studies remain rooted in the abyssal. Against abyssal critical

pedagogy, which is ostensibly subversive but still maintains the white university episteme, 'the pluriversity is most likely to emerge from the alliances and accommodations among those defenders of the pursuit of knowledge without market value who are also defenders of postabyssal science' (Santos, 2018, p. 278). Though neither the global autonomous university nor the pluriversity have yet been realised, there are numerous signs of polyphonic models emerging globally which could lay their foundations. The rest of this paper will survey the various polyphonic examples of alternative higher education which have emerged in the UK since the Browne Review (2010). This survey will aim to document the most significant of these, whilst categorising them according to Santos' ontology. What is remarkable about each of the following examples is not simply that they redress the failings of the ruined neoliberal university model, but that they embody the civic values of community, solidarity, inclusivity, and equality, which exist for the neoliberal university only as key performance indicators within a marketing strategy, which is also to say in the capitalist imaginary.

### **Autonomous Art Schools in The UK, 2010 - Present**

In response to the processes of economisation cited above, a wave of alternative provision has been established for arts and humanities education in the UK. Almost all of these institutions cite the neoliberal reforms enacted by the Browne review (2010), or their consequences, as the catalyst for their formation. Whilst it would be misleading to suggest that all of these nascent subversities are oriented towards art education, the largest percentage demonstrably are. The repeated ambition of these institutions is to offer free access to arts education to students for whom the increased undergraduate tuition fees would otherwise prohibit. Some regard this as an explicitly political mission. Others consider this as a form of community or civic activism beyond any programmatic political ideology.

Despite the significant numbers of alternative art schools which have emerged in the UK over the last decade, very little academic research has been published on them. Currently, the only published book relating to this field is Sam Thorne's (2017) *School: A Recent History of Self-Organised Art Education*. Thorne's ambition is to provide a 'map of a territory', with as international a focus as possible. Accordingly, the examples from the UK are limited. His introductory essay attempts to survey the relationship of avant-garde art to progressive historical models of art education, such as Black Mountain College in the USA (1933-1957), the Bauhaus in Germany (1919-1933), and Vkhutemas in the USSR (1920-1933). Beyond these early twentieth century models, Thorne argues for the relationship of new alternative art schools and what has been called the pedagogical or educational turn in international art curating. The educational turn identifies a tendency within recent contemporary artistic practices or curated exhibitions to foreground the heuristic or educational character of art (Rogoff, 2008). Educational turn artworks and



exhibitions either explicitly present forms of pedagogy as artworks in themselves, or foreground new forms of relationality, participation, or activated spectatorship as an artistic critique of capitalist educational models and capitalist social relations. The best critical survey of the art of the educational turn is O'Neill and Wilson's (2005) *Curating and the Educational Turn* (2010). Many of the artists associated with the educational turn are also cited with Thorne's book.

Thorne opens with an interview with the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, entitled *Capitalise 'Another Model is Possible'*. Bruguera's recent work includes transforming the Manchester Art Gallery, UK (5 July 2019–Sunday 1 September 2019) into a 'School of Integration' where UK citizens could share experiences with the city's immigrant population through a series of free workshops and classes. These classes included workshops on Indian classical music, an introduction to the significance of dumplings in Chinese and Malay culture (Manchester has a significant Chinese and Indian communities), lessons on African hair braiding, and art historical lectures on protest art. Though this was not the stated intention, these subjects are prime examples of *lokvidya*. Prior to this, Bruguera had established an alternative art school in her hometown of Havana. The *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* (Behavior Art Department - 2002-2009) was established as a piece of public art and 'a space of alternative training to the system of art studies in contemporary Cuban society' (Bruguera, 2012). Its form represented a critique of both Cuban education and Cuban society and aimed to be political but not didactic. In Cuba, an *escuela de conducta* is a prison or reform school for the under 16s. Bruguera's title is designed to connote the disciplinary function of education. She had also tried unsuccessfully to establish a project within one of these institutions. The *Cátedra Arte de Conducta* sought to 'recuperate part of the history of art in Cuba that had been suppressed by the government' (Bruguera apud Thorne, 2017, p. 63). Rather than within a formal institution, classes were taught in Bruguera's house. Faculty included visiting professional artists, but also 'lawyers, scientists, film-makers, ex-prisoners, housewives, journalists' (Thorne, 2017, p. 63), all of whom were seen as useful for the educators and facilitators of contemporary performance-based art practices.

Thorne's book also includes an interview with the British contemporary artist Ryan Gander. Gander had established his own alternative art school, *Night School*, based in his studio in East London. The alternative art school comprised a series of screenings, talks, and social activities, including many key figures from London's art scene. This ad-hoc arrangement was given artworld legitimacy when *Night School* was given a residency at London's Institute of Contemporary Art (April - September 2011). Since then, Gander has been attempting to create a more permanent alternative art school called Fairfield International. These attempts to establish a small residential art school in rural Suffolk, were thwarted by the refusal of Gander's financial backers to agree to a twenty-five-year commitment to use the land purely for educational purposes (Gander; Thorne, 2017, p. 212). Here, one encounters a recurrent problem with educational models which seek to exist



independently of the state. On the one hand, one becomes beholden to financial investors who would naturally seek either a short-term return on their investment, or to flip the project for its real estate value should it fail. On the other hand, projects are regularly stifled by the bureaucracy of perpetual funding applications, much of which remains state controlled anyway. A third possibility of crowdfunding has been raised very recently by the efforts of activist Melz Owusu who raised £60,000 to start a Free Black University [FBU]. The FBU aims to offer a wholly decolonised curriculum oriented towards the transformation of the world through the 'radical black imagination'<sup>3</sup>. At the time of writing, the FBU exists as a website with associated online curriculum and learning materials. Currently the project is in a strategic hiatus through which a long-term strategy can be plotted, and sustainable funding secured. One suggestion is that mainstream universities each pay an annual fee to the maintenance of the FBU as a form of reparations for their role in the continuation of white supremacy, through their systemic racism, historic links to slave owners, and their central role in the reproduction of the colonial enlightenment episteme (Swain, 2020).

The FBU is one of 86 different instances of anti-universities and alternative art schools documented on the personal website of artist-researcher Sophia Kosmaoglou (2021b). Alongside this paper, this is the only serious scholarly attempt to begin the mapping of these institutions. Of the various institutions listed by Kosmaoglou, over 30 have been established since the 2010 Browne Review and explicitly identify as alternative art schools. These institutions vary substantially in character, ranging from self-consciously transient and ephemeral interventions to those more closely modelled on mainstream institutions and accordingly aspiring to a more permanent status. However, Thorne (2017, p. 48) argues that they share a number of common characteristics. Firstly, that most alternative art schools aspire to the status of para-institutions, existing as the critical other to mainstream provision. Secondly, that most projects are "[...] small scale and occasionally nomadic, while emphasizing an approach to learning that is discursive and collaborative" (Thorne, 2017, p. 48). Thirdly, that they tend to be organised around anti-hierarchical principles, with many self-consciously rejecting distinctions between teachers and students. Another common denominator is that they tend to be established by artists, and less frequently by curators and educators. Finally, most emphasise the processual character of education above education as a qualification or taught curriculum. Education, in this sense, is regarded as an end in itself rather than a means to an end. This heuristic rather than didactic character aligns the ideology of these alternative art schools with much critical pedagogy which has emerged during the twentieth century. This paper contends that each of the examples cited within this paper meets Negri and Revel's definitions of the CAI. As well as emphasising their autonomous character, the following section of this paper will map these new alternative art schools onto Santos' schema. Beyond documentation, this task represents a gesture of solidarity which will hopefully help the future task of building the pluriversity.

Below, the most significant alternative art schools emerging in the UK since the Browne Review (2010) will be categorised according to their specific polyphony. For the purposes of selection, the paper has chosen to define significance as the institutions which meet at least two of the following criteria: 1) they have an independent website or web-presence; 2) their activity lasted multiple academic years; 3) they have been cited within secondary literature; 4) they have been included either as speakers or delegates for the forthcoming Festival of Alternative Arts Education. Self-evidently, the other requisite for selection is that the institutions must primarily deliver arts education and operate autonomously from mainstream universities. All examples have been established in the post-Browne era. Many other examples of common autonomous art schools have existed prior to this and continue to operate silently in the clandestine undercommons of the university or provincial social centres. The lack of published information on these institutions, which is in some cases deliberate, on even informal social media platforms means that many of these institutions have been overlooked. This paper could therefore also be understood as an invitation to dialogue for these hitherto invisible institutions and groups.

The selected institutions are listed in Appendix A, and sub-categorised according to three groups. The groupings represent a synthesis of Thorne's (2017) and Santos' (2018) schema. A brief description of the activity of each is included, though space prohibits an extensive analytical justification of why each fall into their specific categories. Instead, one key example of each category type will be analysed in the text below as an illustration. The three subcategories are as follows. Firstly, art schools which operate as para-institutions [Polyphonic Art School 1], establishing themselves as either alternative provision for those denied access by finance or forced into existence through the closure of mainstream provision. The second categorisation will be the subversive art schools [Polyphonic Art School 2] which set themselves up explicitly as counter-hegemonic, anti-capitalist, or similar. The final category [Polyphonic Art School 3] is reserved for those institutions which see themselves as closer to educational artworks than art schools. This latter category is the closest to what Harney and Moten mean by 'the beyond of teaching' (in Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 147). Here, formal curricula and learning objectives are abandoned for speculative artistic gestures designed to imagine art education beyond all art schools or universities. Paradoxically, these attempts at the dissolution of the art school are perhaps the clearest gestures made towards dragging the art school out of the abyss. Taken together, these three categories represent a sketch of an as yet incomplete pluriversity-to-come. Drawing upon these examples, the conclusion suggests some of the further polyphony necessary for the realisation of the postabsyssal art school.

**Figure 2 – Video still from the Toma Manifesto-In-The-Making (2018)**



Source: Available at <https://www.toma-art.com/about>.

### **The Polyphonic Art School Type 1 [para-institutions and informal study groups or networks]**

In an enigmatic passing comment from their undercommons essay, Harney and Moten state that ‘the university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings’ (Edu-Factory Collective 2009, p. 146). They are referring explicitly to those critical academics whose intellectual labour is appropriated by the economised university, for the purposes of institutional reputation and research funding, but which nevertheless builds resistance against managerialist practices and the neoliberal university paradigm. Building on this point, Santos (2018, p. 270) argues that ‘dissatisfaction with the university on the part of social groups that only recently gained access to it tends to lead to new social struggles for the right to education and to an education otherwise’. Specifically, he is referring to the underpinning colonial and patriarchal problematic on which the university is founded, and whose prejudices are increasingly exposed by those welcomed within its walls under the badge of inclusion. Beyond race and gender, Santos (2018) highlights other possible areas for decolonization which include ‘access to the university (for students) and access to a university career (for faculty); research and teaching content; disciplines of knowledge, curricula, and syllabi; teaching and learning methods; institutional structure and university governance; and relations between the university and society at large. The political prioritisation of STEM subjects within the university, which this paper has argued to be inseparable from university economisation, has transformed the critical arts and humanities into decolonial voices. These voices not only highlight the technocratic marginalisation of the arts, but also the financial barriers to university participation, limited career prospects, and the intersectionality of the art student. The institutions categorised as Type 1 represent the internal voices of opposition that have eventually coalesced into external prac-

tices or parainstitutions. These do not necessarily demand the abolition of the university but seek to supplement its failings through the establishment of autonomous provision. Internally, such provision is often manifested within political reading groups, extra-curricular elective modules, or special interest networks. Sometimes out of necessity, this dissensual polyphony must actualise as external academic provision.

A typical example is *The Other MA* (<https://www.toma-art.com/> Southend on Sea, 2015 - Present) (Figure 2). This is a twelve-month artist-run educational programme based in Southend, on the South East coast of England. Following the closure of university arts provision in the area, it claims to be the only postgraduate art course on offer in the county of Essex. In the first instance, TOMA is an institution created out of necessity, not political protest. However, the resulting institution has generated its own forms of social learning, solidarity, and care, which increasingly demonstrate the bankruptcy of the neoliberal model. Hall (2018, p. 198) has described the culture of the economised university, particularly its implicit requirements for overwork and competition, as 'a semi-permanent state of exception that instils insecurity on a personal and social basis'. In such a culture, self-care and care for others can be understood as a form of humanist political resistance. At the most basic level of care for the aspiring artists of Essex, TOMA has its own project space, supported by Arts Council of England funding. It offers studio spaces, facilities, and a programme of studio crits, artists talks, workshops, and off-site visits for a £75 monthly fee. In this sense, TOMA cannot be regarded as explicitly anti-capitalist. However, TOMA argue that cooperative values underpin their structure and strategy and self-identify as 'a family unit'. Like a cooperative, membership fees are used to enhance the facilities and provision of the art school for collective benefit. A portion of TOMA income is used to pay visiting artists for tutorial input. Outside of their practice, many of these visiting artists would not have any other way of paying for their subsistence, given the increasingly limited number of paid opportunities in either the art-world or academy, or the insistence on the latter on art teachers having formal academic qualifications such as PhDs. For TOMA, this is a collective gesture against 'an art world that often sees artists at the end of the financial food chain' (TOMA, 2021). Beyond this, TOMA represents a network of artistic care, akin to 'a new family unit where [members] often muck in by sharing lifts, pot luck lunches + washing up duties on Sundays, swap skills in sessions, host impromptu crit sessions on trains, share labour + visit each-others' studios (sic)' (TOMA, 2021). This familial ethos has broadened into a social mission, and TOMA is explicitly targeting those who are currently excluded from, or under-represented, in the art world, such as 'artists living with a disability, artists of colour [,] LGBTQIA [or] women who have been concentrating on supporting a family' (TOMA, 2021). Demonstrably, para-institutions like TOMA do not solely supplement the lack of mainstream provision through third sector voluntarism, but inculcate the *mestizo* knowledge or *lokvidya* that expose and resist university imperialism, in all of its forms. Fig. 2 encapsulates this synthesis of the relational, familial, and political.

## **The Polyphonic Art School Type 2 [The Art School as Subversity]**

As seen in the example above, the autonomous para-institutions tend to organically generate subversive ideologies and counter-hegemonic subjectivities. Following Santos, these can therefore be understood as pluriversities, rather than universities. Furthermore, they could be understood as the first developmental stage leading towards the polyphonic university. However, such a narrative runs the risk of substituting one totalising teleology of the university for another. The essence of polyphony is pluralism, and Santos (2017, p. 378) stresses that polyphonic universities can emerge from both defensive and offensive strategies. Though the Type 1 institutions above generally fall into the former category, the latter proceed from a rejection of the university model, if not an outright call for its abolition. Such institutions, which Santos classifies as ‘subversities’ (Santos, 2017, p. 390-401) are not only designed to diversify the university monoculture but to issue ‘pressing demands for cognitive, social, and historical justice’ (390). The principles underpinning the subversity are conflict, non-conformity, indignation, rebellion, democracy, and a Freirean conception of education as liberation (Freire, 1996). They appropriate or occupy ‘the name “university” in order to carry out learning processes’ (378) which embody a critique of the practices of mainstream universities. Their tradition is not that of Humboldt, but of the anarchist popular universities of nineteenth century Europe and early twentieth century Latin America. Such universities sought to provide access to the social knowledge denied to workers and were taught voluntarily by committed professors. Sessions were also convened ‘in popular and familiar spaces so that the workers could be spared the solemn and hostile environment evoked by conventional university spaces’ (397).

All of the institutions listed in Appendix A: Type 2 could be classified as subversities. *The School of the Damned* (<https://schoolofthedamned.wixsite.com/sotd2019/about>, UK, 2014 - Present) is the most explicitly anarchic of any of these institutions (Figure 3 and Figure 4). Formed in London in 2014, from the outset it has explicitly self-identified as a protest institution. Each year members co-author a manifesto for the institution which invariably restates a collective opposition towards the hegemonic neoliberal university model. Its pedagogic programme consists of a monthly group crit, usually convened in artist-run or public spaces, taught by guest speakers, who are invited by the school following a democratic selection process. The annual programme culminates in a graduate show. Despite SOTD opposing the mainstream art school model, they claim that their counter-course has as much rigour as a university MA. Two notable features of SOTD need to be highlighted. Firstly, rather than an economised market economy, SOTD operates as a pedagogic gift-economy (Hyde, 1983; Mauss 2002 [1954]). Through what the school call the ‘labour exchange model’, the time spent by invited artists in preparing and facilitating SOTD seminars is repaid in kind by the voluntary labour of SOTD students. This

labour is undertaken towards whatever activities the invited speakers require help with. Students have cooked dinners, installed exhibitions, or helped produce illustrations for academic papers (Miles, 2016). Venues for the school have been secured in precisely the same manner. A teaching space at the avant-garde London gallery The Horse Hospital was paid for by SOTD students invigilating at exhibitions. A teaching space above Camden pub The Cock Tavern was paid for by students working shifts at the bar. This model of a gift-economy not only bonds all the students in a relationship of solidarity but also forges alliances with partner venues and organizations. In recent years, SOTD has expanded its operations across the UK to maximise participation, hosting classes in Liverpool, London, Sheffield, Glasgow, and Newcastle. There is no reason why this model could not be expanded internationally. The second distinct feature of SOTD is that control of its curricula, ideology, and strategy are determined by the cohort of any given year. Students gain a place through a selective application process. Members are chosen by the previous year's cohort, who then hand over control of the school to the next graduating year. This not only means that the SOTD perpetually avoids institutionalisation, but also that each of its years are bonded in an ethical relationship. In all of these aspects, SOTD embodies what Santos calls 'itinerant' or 'errant' polyphony (411) which extends the university beyond the control of specific teaching institutions and locations.

### **The Polyphonic Art School Type 3 [Art schools as artworks]**

Of the alternative art schools surveyed, there is an evident third category of practice that exceeds the institutional sense of the subversity or the pluriversity. These alternative art schools, if they can be called art schools anymore, exist beyond the frame of institutions and formal curriculum, seeing themselves as closer to works of contemporary art and or performance. As stated, these pedagogic-artistic interventions build upon the educational turn in contemporary art and its associated theory. Though Santos does not attempt to discuss contemporary art or art schools in his work, his description of the polyphonic university overlaps with the theorisations of relational or educational turn art. In his influential curatorial theory book *Relational Aesthetics* (2002 [1998]), Bourriaud (2002 [1998], p. 14) described a transition in contemporary art away from the production of objects and towards the construction of sociability via playful scenarios, staged encounters, or 'social interstices'. These relational artworks foreground 'the realm of human interactions and their social context rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space. The canonic 'masterpiece', produced by the celebrated artistic genius, embodies the latter paradigm. In contradistinction, relational art is co-produced and immaterial, to the extent it is impossible to identify a singular source of artistic production or meaning. In a later book, Bourriaud defined this creative mode as *Postproduction* (2002). Reflecting the general societal shift from industrial Fordist production to Post-Fordist immaterial la-

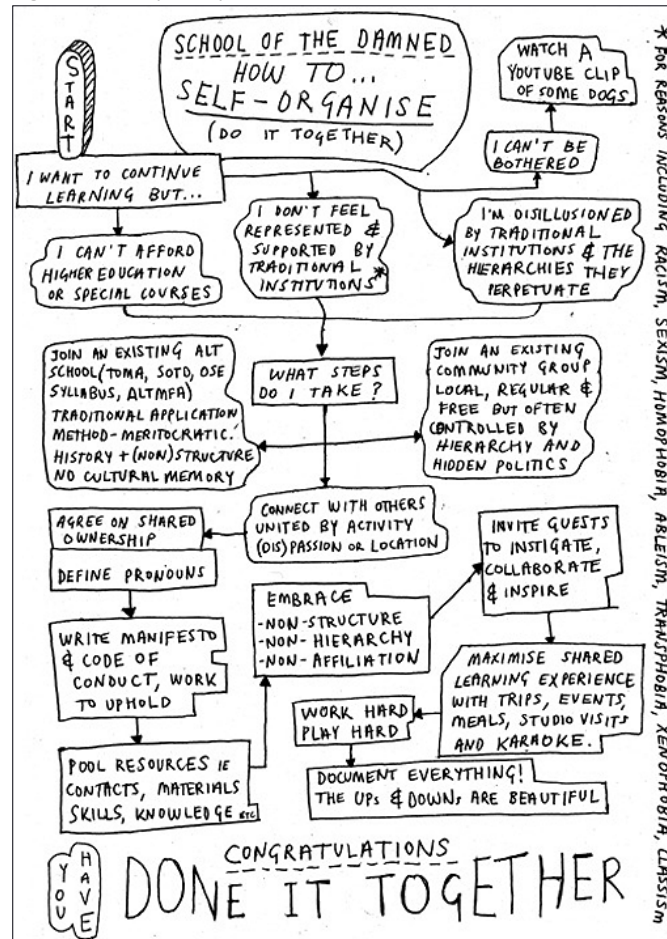


bour, postproductive art eschews original object-based production, in favour of interactivity, recycled forms, appropriation, and a culture of free exchange. All of these characteristics typify online culture in the digital age. Here the artist is seen as a remixer or DJ. All of the institutions listed within Appendix A: Type 3 can be understood as ‘remixes’ of the art school, which is dematerialised as an institution leaving only its pedagogic relations. Like postproductive art, these Type 3 practices can be understood in a similar manner to Negri and Revel’s distinction of the transition from AWI to Post-Fordist CAI. More generally, they represent the popular university project pushed to its absolute limits. Instead of an economised system of university brands, customer satisfaction, and superstar professors (Cruikshank, 2019), these works decenter teaching beyond institutional powers and embody the central democratic hypothesis of Jacques Rancière’s (1991) *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Ultimately, they all produce what Santos (2018, p. 276) calls a ‘pedagogy of emergences’ [that is] oriented to amplify the meaning of the latent and potentially liberating sociabilities, the not-yets of hope that exist on the other side of the abyssal line, the colonial side, where absences are actively produced so that domination may proceed undisturbed’.

The examples of these anti-institutions or postproductive art schools are so heterogenous in character that summary is unwise, if not impossible. In lieu of such a summary, one quick example will help illustrate their general tendencies or pedagogic strategies. @.ac, pronounced phonetically as ‘attack’ (UK, 2014 - present<sup>4</sup>), is a non-hierarchical artists’ collective who arrange site specific pedagogical interventions in contested social spaces. Like the subversity which ‘occupies’ the name of the university, the @.ac name is stolen from the generic suffix of UK academic e-mail addresses. @.ac state that they are ‘dedicated to the salvation of the art school and, if not its salvation, its eradication and replacement as social form’. They exist as a nomadic anti-institution, with no permanent members. Their activity and membership are negotiated on a project-by-project basis, drawing upon the skills of actors necessary for individual project realisation. @.ac projects, which they state can be understood as test sites for an ‘art-education-to-come’, usually follow two strategies. Either they transform the spaces of the economised university, such as academic conferences, lecture theatres, university campuses and online intranet sites, into relational artworks, or they attempt to recreate university style seminars or lectures in public spaces, which can be engaged with by the public for free. Such activity is not simply the commitment of the radical academic who wishes to replace the capitalist university with the popular university. Nor is it solely concerned with subverting the public image of the university. In Harney and Moten’s (2013) terms, such works are an enactment of the ‘fugitive enlightenment’ as the ‘ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons’ (Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 147). Against the ‘auto-interpellative torque’ (ibid) of the economised, the dissensual and counter-hegemonic movement of such projects constitutes a democratic heuristic, which is perpetually redefined at the point of reception, rather than a formal institutional curriculum.



Figure 3 – Flyer by School of the Damned, Class of 2018



Source: Archive by author.

## Conclusion: towards a pluriversity of art schools

In the face of current conditions, Harney and Moten argue, 'one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university' (in Edu-Factory Collective, 2009, p. 145). All of the institutions listed above are subversive in that they steal prospective students, and therefore revenue, from the economised model. However, many of these institutions depend upon tenured mainstream university faculty. Considered as a redistribution of wealth from the neo-liberal university to its excluded others, this subversive theft of teaching must also be understood as a political act. At the same time, this

is a demonstration of the financial precarity of autonomous education. Apart from SOTD, very few of these initiatives have found a sustainable way of reproducing year upon year teaching and learning beyond the wage-labour model. Historically, popular universities have often relied on the voluntarism of sympathetically committed university academics, whose remuneration comes from elsewhere. The SOTD 'labour-exchange' suggests a path beyond this dependency on the academy and has parallels with 'time-bank' networks which are becoming organised internationally<sup>5</sup>. This networked system of organisation raises the possibility of a similar network of timebanking, or labour-exchange being established between alternative art schools. However, the problem with much third sector voluntarism, where most timebanking currently operates, is that it simply plugs the gaps in state provision, ameliorating its most harmful effects whilst not holding government directly to account.

Yet, by offering supplementary provision to the excluded or underprivileged, these autonomous educational initiatives are doing something far more socially significant. Beyond the transference of artistic knowledge and the conferment of graduate diplomas, these institutions are gradually inculcating habits of "[...] self-government, interdependence, mutual aid, underpinned by values of liberty, equality and fraternity" (Kinna, 2020). These are the hallmarks of a functioning anarchist society, committed to non-domination and the free individual. These alternative art schools embody the values including diversity, inclusivity, criticality, community, entrepreneurship, and citizenship, all of which the neoliberal university merely pays lip-service to. Furthermore, their cohorts are committed to a collective pedagogic vision which shames neoliberal conceptions of student engagement. If, following Hall (2018), we are to characterise the alienated university academic as anxious, overworked, impoverished both economically and emotionally, then the subjectivities emerging from these institutions, which recentre questions of care, solidarity, community, and generosity, have to be considered as revolutionary. Suissa (2010, p. 5) has suggested that an anarchist philosophy of education supplements standard questions of "what should be taught, to whom, and with what in mind?" with the crucial question "by whom?". Collectively, these institutions represent a challenge to hegemonic assumptions that the 'economised' (Brown 2015; McGettigan 2013; Edu-Factory Collective, 2009) UK university is best situated to teach the next generation of artists. Whilst governmental discourses depict arts education as 'low value', and a poor personal investment, the existence of these alternative art schools demonstrates a continued appetite for arts education. The economisation of mainstream higher education is turning prospective students to non-commodified alternatives, if not creating their own art schools autonomously from the state. Many of these are becoming viable alternatives to economised art school, whose financialised logic risks writing itself out of existence. The slogan written above the entrance to the occupied LIP factory was "*C'est possible: on fabrique, on vend, on se paie!*"

[It's possible: we make it, we sell it, we pay ourselves]. These alternative art schools seriously question whether a formal undergraduate and postgraduate education in the arts could not easily be replaced by an artist or artworld-led system of self-education. This would represent an AWI uniting artists, artworld, and art education.

As a heterogeneity of intentional communities, collectively these institutions also represent the possibility of CWI emerging, which could be close to the 'global autonomous university' model imagined by the Edu-Factory project. That said, this nascent art school multitude does not yet equate to Santos' postabyssal and polyphonic pluriversity. Of the institutions listed, only Network 11 could genuinely claim to be inculcating the epistemologies of the South. However, calls to 'decolonise the university' generated debates within the sector. A special edition of the journal of the Association for Art History was published on January 22nd 2020 calling to 'Decolonise Art History' (Grant; Price, 2020). Such debates within the academy will doubtless generate para-institutions on its fringes, or become the priorities of subversities like the FBU. Since the advent of institutional critique practices in the late 1960s, much has been written about the white patriarchal bourgeois character of the artworld. Yet, apparently very little concrete change is being realised, in the UK at least, especially regarding racial inclusion. Clearly, there is much work to be done by the sector in this regard. The latest Arts Council of England [ACE] diversity report 'Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case' (ACE, 2020), published on February 18th, 2020, paints a depressing, but thoroughly predictable, picture concerning both the lack of diversity and institutional inertia regarding meaningful change on any of the fronts of BAME and disabled representation. Of the 663 arts organisations in ACE's national portfolio and 21 museums, BAME workers made up 12% of the workforce, whereas only 5% of gallery staff were not white. In response, the ACE director, and ex-head of the Tate Gallery, Sir. Nicholas Serota offered the following earnest platitudes:

'Diversity of thought, experience and perspective are vital, and inclusivity and relevance are therefore driving principles in the Arts Council's next 10-year strategy' (Serota apud ACE, 2020, p. 3).

Yet, according to HESA sector data for the academic year 2014/5 - 2018/19 only 16% of students studying creative arts were not white, in comparison to 26% non-white students generally.

Situated at the front lines of the conflict between scientific and artisanal knowledge, and between the commodification of intellectual labour and the rejection of knowledge deemed socio-economically useless (Santos 2018, p. 278), these experiments in teaching and learning deserve greater scholarly attention. They represent spaces where workerist consciousness raising is aligned with the prophetic organisation of the multitude. They reassert the original civic mission of the university towards the 'social transformation' of citizens and communities (NUS / UUK, 2015), whilst also reversing the degeneration of homo-politicus

into homo-oeconomicus (Brown, 2015). Whilst more work needs to be done to align these emergent radical models with the epistemologies of the South, hopefully the act of mapping their polyphonic voices within this paper begins the process of forming the critical alliance between defenders of the pursuit of knowledge without market value' and the 'defenders of postabyssal science' which Santos recognises as the precondition of the pluriversity (Santos 2018, p. 278).

**Figure 4 – School of the Damned Graduation Cava (2014)**



Source: Archive by author.

## Appendix A

### *The Polyphonic Art School Type 1 [Para institutions and informal study groups or networks]*

- *Art and Critique* (London, 2015-2019) was a peer led network of artists dedicated to critical engagement with art theoretical research, taking the form of a reading group held at two social centres in London, The Field (<http://thefieldnx.com>) and London Action Resource Centre (<http://larc.space/>).
- *Art / Work Association* (<https://artworkassociation.org/>, London 2011 - Present) is an 'association of artists and creative workers and a self-generated programme of talks, screenings, seminars, reading groups, workshops and critical feedback sessions, conceived as a forum for peer exchange'. A recent event included talks by the filmmaker Elaine Constantine and the artist Dominic from Luton, in partnership with established providers City & Guilds of London Art School and the University of the Arts, London.
- *Conditions* (<https://conditions.studio/> Croydon, 2018 - present) was established to provide low-cost studios for emerging artists. Utilising funding from Croydon Council and a Mayor of London Creative Enterprise Zone scheme, studio rents are drastically reduced. In return, studio-holders are expected to 'seek alternatives to the current state of art and art education in Greater London'.
- *Evening Class* is a self-organised learning environment based in Poplar, East London. There is no selection process nor any other barriers to participation. The group meets every Tuesday and Thursday evening to run a programme determined by the group's members who each pay £35 per month to sustain the group's activities.
- *Fairfield International* (<http://fairfieldinternational.co.uk/#>, Saxmundham, Suffolk, 2013 - Present), is an artist-run residential art school conceived by the artist Ryan Gander, discussed above.
- *Feral Art School* (<https://www.feralartschool.org/> Hull, 2018-Present) was established following the closure of the Hull School of Art in Design, in 2018. Inspired by the work of Mike Neary and Joss Winn in establishing the Social Sciences Centre (<https://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/> Lincoln 2011-2019), Feral was established as a workers' cooperative. Tuition fees are affordable compared to the short-course provision of neoliberal universities, and the fees go directly into sustaining the co-operative and offering wages to its staff, many of whom were made redundant following the closure of Hull School of Art and Design (Goodman; Hudson-Miles; Jones, 2021).
- *The Margate School* (<https://www.themargateschool.com/> Margate, 2015 - Present) offers an MA Fine Art alongside a portfolio of short courses. Their MA is formally accredited by a partner outside the UK, Normandy L'École Supérieure d'Art in Normandy, and the course carries a fully transferable 120 credits under the European Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme.



mulation and Transfer Scheme [ECTS]. Course fees range from £1,650 - £4,000 depending on whether prospective students wish to be provided with a studio or are based in Margate and East Kent. Margate School is run as a not-for-profit enterprise.

- *The New Independent Art School of Hastings* (<https://www.niash.org/>, Hastings, 2013 - 2015) was an artist-led not-for-profit initiative, developed by the artists Dean Kenning and Kate Renwick during an artists' residency. For one year, it transformed the third floor of the Rock House community centre into a platform for 'workshops, readings, collective education events, exhibitions, artists residencies and a number of unforgettable parties'.

- *The School for Civic Imagination* (<https://www.cca-glasgow.com/programme/school-for-civic-imagination>, Glasgow, 2017-present) is an informal learning programme hosted at the Centre for Contemporary Art. It comprises a lecture and workshop series aiming to solidify the creative networks of practitioners across Glasgow and facilitate 'further development of deeper connections between socially engaged art practice and civic life'.

- *The Other MA* (<https://www.toma-art.com/> Southend on Sea, 2015 - Present), discussed in detail above.

- *Turps Banana* (<https://www.turpsbanana.com/art-school> London 2012 - Present) was established by the artist Marcus Harvey in London 2012 as an artist-led painting programme. For Harvey, 'the aim of the school is to do what many art schools used to do and don't anymore, and that's to provide the opportunity for postgraduate students to continue their explorations of paint' (Coleman-Smith, 2015, p. 62). It operates as both a studio programme and a correspondence course. The studio course costs £6,500 p.a., making it the most expensive of the alternative art school models. For that fee, students get a studio space near Elephant and Castle, South London, which is accessible 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, and a yearlong curriculum which approximates the academic year. Turps Banana also offers a Correspondence Course for £1750 p.a. where students are taught online by an allocated artist-mentor.

### *The Polyphonic Art School Type 2 [The Art School as Subversity]*

- *Alt-MFA* (<http://altmfa.blogspot.com/> London) claim to have been the first model of alternative art provision set up in the country (Macpherson, 2015). Established in 2010, they embody aspects of both the para-university and subversity, explicitly modelling themselves on the conventional MFA (Master of Fine Arts) degree, but delivering this through peer-led, horizontal, and experimental methods. Their institutional structure has evolved from reading groups, artists talks, and studio crits, into more experimental pedagogies which encompass thematic co-research, exhibitions, walking and eating together. The latter is emphasised as a particularly central feature of the school. Since the 90s 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriaud, 2002 [1998]) artists like Rirkrit Tirivanija

have highlighted commensality as a political act. Similarly, analysing the role of eating together in Greece, post-financial crisis, Sutton (2018) has recently argued it embodies 'the values of life: solidarity, mutual respect, and a society based on human values' and can be argued to embody an immanent critique of neoliberal economisation which he considers both political and pedagogic.

- *Islington Mill Art Academy* (<https://www.islingtonmill.com/>, Manchester 2008-Present) was formed immediately prior to the Browne Review (2010) but is included within this list because of its scale and success. Since its formation within the thriving creative community of Islington Mill, IMAA has grown into a genuinely viable, and therefore subversive, alternative to the neoliberal art school, if not neoliberal societal relations generally. Situated between the cities of Salford and Manchester IMAA is one of the many creative occupants of a repurposed Victorian Mill. Though it has recently been awarded ACE funding, the financial model of Islington Mill is both sustainable and self-financing. Revenue is generated through renting out studio spaces, and studio holders pay rent through revenue generated by their personal practice, and sales from exhibitions hosted at the Mill. Supplementary income comes through bed and breakfast accommodation within the complex. IMAA's residents rent studios and reflect the full breadth of the creative industries, including visual artists, curators, pop music bands, DJs, designers, queer collectives. The Art Academy is completely free, without any formal curricula, and is comprised of a programme of workshops, talks, crits, and peer-support offered by the residents of Islington Mill. Effectively, Islington Mill is a self-sustaining creative ecology of mutual aid and co-learning which transcends institutional curricula. Islington Mill's publicity claims that the organisation is inspired by the Situationist International and dedicated to acting as 'a catalyst for the creative act'.

- *Network 11* (<https://ntwrk11.wordpress.com/about/>, London, 2015 - Present) is a peer-learning group dedicated to foregrounding 'the positions of British based artists of colour and LGBT communities'. As such it represents the first explicitly post-abyssal alternative arts organisation within this survey.

- *Open School East* (<https://openschooleast.org/> London and Margate, 2013 - Present) was an attempt to produce an art school that was 'flexible, self-directed, sociable, and free' (Thorne, 2017, p. 25). It took the form of an open call for participants, of which ten to fifteen artists received free tuition and a studio space to develop their practice for a year. Now it has expanded into a yearlong Associates Programme, for emerging artists from diverse backgrounds, a Young Associates Programme, for 16-18 year olds, the Despacito Art School for 5-12 year olds, and the 'Public Programme' offered by OSE to facilitate 'interactions between the artistic community, the local neighbourhood and the broader public' (OSE, 2019). All of these remain free, supported by national arts funding applications. The 'Pilot Year 2013-14, including walking tours of Kings Cross, London, led by the artist Richard Wentworth. In 2019 OSE



Associate held a series of free public cooking workshops at the Adult Education Centre, Margate, which not only taught creative cooking skills but led to the opening of a community canteen at the centre.

- *The School of the Damned* (<https://schoolofthedamned.wixsite.com/sotd2019/about>, UK, 2014 - Present), discussed above.
- *The Anti-MA* (Brighton, 2019-present) is a very recently established programme of peer-led learning which meets monthly at Coachwerks artspace. It continues despite the recent COVID-19 lockdown and their recent manifesto was co-authored over Zoom. Emphasising co-learning, horizontality, equality, opportunity, and friendship, this manifesto embodies a value set which must be considered subversive in comparison to the hegemonic model.

### *The Polyphonic Art School Type 3 [Art schools as artworks]*

- *@.ac*, pronounced phonetically as 'attack' (<http://www.attackdotorg.com/>, UK, 2014 - present), discussed above.
- *The Alternative Art College* (<https://alternativeartcollege.co.uk/>, Lincoln 2011-2017) was established as 'a pragmatic HE protest' against the neoliberal economisation of art education. The AAC claim that art education represents 'not just a process for capital gain and a career but the avenue for social change questioning of the world around us. Learning with and of art is a tension with capital and it's our prerogative to highlight this tension'. The AAC was a series of free sporadic artistic interventions and artists talks which have now been documented on their website, which also contains a valuable resource of broader alternative arts pedagogy.
- *DIY Art School* (<https://www.facebook.com/DiyArtSchool/>, Manchester 2013-14), is an online platform 'in constant flux', created as a 'survival platform' and space of visibility for arts graduates.
- *Nomad Art School* (<https://nomadgallery.weebly.com/>, UK 2015-Present), is an 'open, permanent, free, and itinerant Art School, where artists offer their knowledge, in person or virtually: no syllabus, no selection, no accreditation [...] Consequently, there is no certificate at the end of the course, because it is not a course, and so never ends'.
- *The Precarious University* (<http://www.lcac.org.uk/wp/2016/05/11/the-precarious-university/>, Manchester, 2016 - Present), is an ongoing series of workshops and ad-hoc lectures arranged as gestures of detournement in public spaces and formal academic symposia.
- *The Silent University* (<https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/silent-university>, London, Hamburg, Stockholm, Ruhr, 2012-Present) was a project established by Turkish artist Ahmet Öğüt and has subsequently been published as a book of the same name. This project included a year-long residency at the Tate gallery, London. *The Silent University* seeks to work towards a transversal pedagogy, which seeks to offer a 'solidarity based knowledge exchange platform by displaced people and forced migrants [...] led by a group of lecturers, consultants and re-

search fellows'. In particular, it connects migrant or refugee academics with the structures of academia which their status would otherwise deny them. The titular 'silencing' refers to this denial of a voice.

● *The University of Strategic Optimism (2011)* (<https://universityforstrategicoptimism.wordpress.com/>, London 2011-14) no longer continues activity but its actions have been preserved as a website, and they have also published their positions in an academic volume. Whilst not explicitly identifying as an alternative art school, it is included within this list because of their tactics of delivering inaugural lectures as site-specific pieces of performance art, akin to the Situationist International. For example, the inaugural lecture which critiqued the economisation of the neoliberal university, was delivered in a high street outside a Lloyds TSB bank branch in Borough high street, Borough, London. The second lecture was delivered walking about a Tesco's supermarket.

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## Notes

- 1 Available at: <https://www.newcontemporaries.org.uk/>. Accessed on: 1 Aug. 2021.
- 2 Available at: <https://vidyaashram.org/>. Accessed on: 1 Aug. 2021.
- 3 Available at: <http://www.freeblackuni.com>. Accessed on: 1 Aug. 2021.
- 4 Available at: <http://www.attackdotorg.com/>. Accessed on: 1 Aug. 2021.
- 5 Available at: <https://timebanking.org/>. Accessed on: 1 Aug. 2021.

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