‘Educational Taylorism’, letter to the editor by Stephen Lee, originally published in Art Monthly issue no. 316, May 2008 pp no.15.

Having read Graham Crowley’s ‘Can’t get no satisfaction’ and reflected upon my own experiences of teaching and being taught fine art, I can appreciate the current state of educational Taylorism and the overbearing, corporate-style management he describes. The corporate model is a powerful one. It tends to be one-dimensional and seamless, where accountability and success can be clearly measured. To understand the impact of the corporatisation of art schools it’s important, I think, to examine the language or jargon used to organise and disseminate learning, then look at the extent to which fine art students adopt this language. Fine art graduates talk of promotion and marketing, or finding a niche market for their work. If a critic writes about a graduate student’s work the artist may not necessarily see this as participation in an independent critical arena. On the contrary it’s likely they may see it as an opportunity to gain an additional promotional tool with which to market their work. My point is that the corporate model is pervasive in our wider culture industry.
In the interest however, of answering Crowley’s letter rather than reiterating the all too familiar problems, I’d like to try to offer some strategies of resistance. I think that this can be done at the level of language. When one culture colonises another it imposes its jargon by replacing the existing culture’s language with its own. This is done by re-naming and thereby transforming familiar ideas. To some extent the teaching of fine art has been colonised by both corporate and educational jargon, so that rather than acting as support structures or scaffolding they can overwhelm the substance of what’s taught. (This problem is compounded when, in the interests of efficiency, teaching hours are reduced. Inevitably a lecturer will struggle to provide significant content within a reduced time frame).
I feel that in the classroom or studio a constant resistance to the use of jargon is needed, where both lecturers and students critically examine the language used to discuss fine art. Translation of received language into plain language is a process whereby students can control and determine their own artwork. In this way the teaching ‘inputs’ and ‘outcomes’ stand a chance of adding up to more than the sum of their parts.
In addition, I believe that art students benefit massively from listening to, reading and discussing literature. Many of the important art movements in the past have been closely linked to literary movements. I think that the development of a knowledgeable but straightforward language in the studio will prevent what Crowley refers to as the tendency of management to ‘infantilise’ the culture and discourse of art schools.

Ironically, it seems that we are approaching a situation where a comparison can be drawn between the direction our corporate universities are working towards and the academies of the nineteenth century. This kind of controlled, prescriptive, professionalism can be resisted.

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