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A State of Flux

This education will only have meaning if it allows the artist and gives full credence to his role and contribution to society and this is the measurement of a civilisation — even if it be in an institution.

Harry Thubron¹

When Harry Thubron was appointed Head of Painting at Leeds College of Art in 1956, one of his first acts was to remove the dividing partitionⁱ and open up the studio space.² Within this newly defined area, new concepts were introduced to students, concepts that required them to examine the very basis of their art praxis. Thubron was bringing his students up to speed with developments in modern art, in which process imagination and spontaneity were elevated over technique.³ This new way of looking at and teaching art became known as the Basic Course⁴ and was ultimately to be adopted in one form or another throughout all the art colleges in Britain.ⁱⁱ

- i In 1956, Leeds College of Art was separated into five main schools: Painting, Sculpture, Design, Architecture and Teacher Training (David Lewis (ed.), *The Incomplete Circle: Eric Atkinson, art and education*, Surrey: Scholar Press, 2000, p. 54). Opening up the studio was to become a recurring theme, culminating perhaps in the open plan studio of the Polytechnic Fine Art Department, known as the Hangar.
- ii Richard Hamilton in Newcastle and Tom Hudson at Leicester both evolved versions of what became identified as the Basic Course.

What Thubron could not have realised, however, was quite how radical teaching at Leeds College of Art was to become, for although Thubron inaugurated a break with the traditional methods of teaching, his students worked within a formal structure.ⁱⁱⁱ Later developments, which will form the majority of this account, show just how far the Leeds experiment went beyond Thubron's first departures. Certainly he was not in favour of the unreserved freedom of expression that came to characterise the Fine Art course at Leeds in the 1960s and later years.^{iv} But, to begin with, the future seemed to lie in widening the student's appreciation of what art was and could become. In this, Thubron had the backing of Herbert Read and other luminaries of the art world and beyond. Students could attend lectures^v from the historian Asa Briggs, the sociologist Richard Hoggart and the art historian Ernst Gombrich, among others.⁵

The art college became a progressive paradigm, attracting world renowned *avant-garde* artists as visitors and tutors. Thubron brought in Terry Frost, Alan Davie and Hubert Dalwood, pioneers of abstract art who all held Gregory Fellowships at Leeds University. An early consequence of the pioneering methodologies at Leeds was that the students' work no longer fitted the criteria looked for by the prestigious London colleges. In 1957, the Board of Education examiners based in South Kensington failed all of the Fine Art sculpture students from Leeds, who subsequently had to retake the examination with less adventurous work calculated to please the Board.⁶

In 1964, Harry Thubron quit his job and took up a teaching post at Lancaster College of Art. He was succeeded at Leeds by Eric Atkinson, who continued his practice of bringing in prestigious visitors and inspired teachers. Eric Atkinson was a great administrator and much of the success of Leeds in the 1960s was due to his

ⁱⁱⁱ David Seeger, one of Harry Thubron's original students, has provided an enumerated list of the Basic Course curriculum, which can be found in the Endnotes. Thubron himself left no notes other than in a 1967–68 paper written with Martin Shuttleworth, *Fine Art Views on Central Education Core*, in which the authors write about “establishing a milieu in which students ‘learn how to learn for themselves’ and at the same time allowing both staff and students to establish and select their own tradition. The essential essence of which will be the building of bridges between differing disciplines. This will demand an ‘open’ system.” (Harry Thubron and Martin Shuttleworth, *Fine Art Views on Central Education Core*, from a 1967–68 paper in the National Art Education archive at Bretton Hall.)

^{iv} Miles McAlinden, who was a student on Thubron's first Basic Course, wrote by email, “Harry gave us our heads to develop further what he had started, and we did. Years later I met him at John Wood's and I got the idea that he thought we had gone ways that he couldn't accept. Isn't that the way of many fathers?” (John Wood was the Arts Officer for the Leeds Education Authority from 1957 and an influential supporter of Leeds College of Art.)

^v Miles McAlinden commented, “These lectures were new indeed. Up to that point the only lecture we had was on Art History. Visitors and other areas of interest were not accommodated. Here began Liberal Studies.”

abilities — so much so that Patrick Heron could write in the *Guardian*, “Leeds is the most influential art school in Europe since the Bauhaus.”⁷ Heron, who visited Leeds as an external assessor in the late 1960s, “insisting on First and Upper Seconds right across the board”⁸, believed that the art schools had contributed enormously to the ascendancy of British culture in the 1960s and would go on to write,

[T]he startlingly new image which Britain has presented to the world since about 1961 had its origins in the British art schools. About ten years ago British art students suddenly became conspicuous on the pavements of our cities in a way they had never been before: it wasn’t just hair, or clothes or style of walking but a mixture of all three — and all three were revolutionary.⁹

Of course, this does not take into account the rock and role call of musicians who came from art school to define the 1960s and beyond.^{vi}

So, one way or another, the art colleges contributed to making the 1960s the era that it was: exciting, experimental, colourful and subversive. This seemed particularly to be the case at Leeds College of Art, which had defined itself as a place where existing boundaries were routinely challenged. Here there was a fusion of art and attitude which, having begun as an *avant-garde* notion, had become almost part of the curriculum at Leeds by late 1969. This was the year that I and other students arrived in the pristine white interior of the vast new Main Studio, the Hangar of Leeds Polytechnic. At first glance, it was a *tabula rasa*, but, in fact, one that had been indelibly marked by a history of which we were the unwitting inheritors.

To be a Fine Art student at Leeds then was to be thrust into an ongoing experiment, one that had abandoned any discernible methodology. This was where Harry Thubron’s original breakthrough had unwittingly led. The belief that the old order was to be challenged and replaced with new and radical innovations was the template for art education at Leeds, clustering around the notion that greater freedom will inevitably produce greater creativity, and indeed, this seemed to be the case. In 1970, there were nine first class honours awarded to Leeds Fine Art students, apparently a statistically improbable amount.^{vii}

vi To name just a few: John Mayall, Jarvis Cocker, Charlie Watts, John Lennon, Keith Richards, Jimmy Page, John Cale, Viv Stanshall, Ronnie Wood, Eric Clapton, Pete Townsend, Ray Davis, Syd Barrett, Bryan Ferry, Brian Eno and Marc Almond. These last two have Leeds Fine Art connections.

vii Information from Miles McAlinden via email: “By the end of the 1960s, things had turned out better than planned. 1970 was the highpoint with exam results so good that the staff complained as well as the Ministry — six firsts — not statistically possible etc. (P. Heron’s writings). Things started to go wrong with moving into the Polytechnic — no availability of a quiet space in which to introduce the new students to Leeds FA in the manner organically developed in the old buildings via a group project in the first term that had proved to be so successful and productive.”

It was hoped that we, the latest intake of students, would further demonstrate the soundness of the Leeds experiment, and indeed some students did. Others demonstrated that given enough rope they would get tangled up in it and fall over, and some fell further than others. This happened to me, but it was also symptomatic of the times. By the end of the 1960s, it was apparent that things had not turned out as planned. The non-materialist lifestyle had become a way of avoiding work and responsibility, and drugs and music were no longer an alternative but a fixture as what was once original became predictable and more and more fresh faces arrived in Bohemia. Still, there was never going to be a retracing of steps, a re-examination of the hypothesis. It had all gone beyond that since part of the process of seeking ever greater freedom was to abandon any prescribed system. Systems had to be smashed and replaced with something altogether more anarchic and freewheeling. Nothing succeeds like excess, as Oscar Wilde observed, and the next step forward was to push things further than ever before. This was bound to be interesting.

Since then, all those years have slid into the past and become a moment in time that can be held up to the light, examined and dissected. Yet history is a continuum and what seemed singular to us was merely part of an ongoing process. We didn't know the back-story then, but perhaps we would have benefited from this knowledge. I certainly now think that what occurred before we arrived at Leeds was central to our experience as students there at the *fin de sixties*. So now that it's possible to look back, having done the research, talked to the people who were there and gathered up all of the fragments from the archive, what becomes apparent is that there had been a party going on and we arrived at around the time that everybody had probably had too much to drink, things were getting out of hand and some serious revellers had already left.

One of these was Robin Page, a name that at the time meant nothing to me as I had just turned twenty years old and had absolutely no interest in some tutor who had just left before I arrived at Leeds Polytechnic. It was only much later that I discovered that Robin Page had been at the apex of adventurous experimentation at Leeds College of Art. If my attempts to reconstruct the significant events and people of the time were to be worthwhile, I would definitely need to speak to him, not least because his profile in the existing histories of Leeds College of Art seemed to be less than he deserved. His contemporaries, artists like Patrick Hughes and Miles McAlinden, rated him very highly, and when I came across my first archive report of his activities in London, it did suggest a force of nature:

Page has a kick which would have made Tristan Tzara purr and turned on Surrealists everywhere: he screams a plant to death. Up there on the stage is this demure little plant minding its own business when Page emerges at the back of the auditorium in a wine stained, slime bespattered tuxedo. "I'm gonna getcha plant," he howls. He

comes down the aisle giving it verbal hell. The audience is uneasy, especially when he confronts that poor little plant and pours insults all over it in a raving crescendo. Something has to give and it is usually the nerve of somebody in the stalls. "Leave it alone" cries an anguished voice and soon the hall echoes in protest.¹⁰

This seemed closer to the sort of thing that I could associate with my own experience of Leeds; it was crazy and funny and not the type of art you could hang on the wall or even sell to anybody. What would you sell? What could be bought? This art defied commodification. It was a performance and you had to be there to see it. Performance Art had become a major part of the Leeds Fine Art Department's output; art that was intended to bypass the galleries was another. Robin Page had been doing what we were just discovering quite a few years before we arrived and then he had left, gone to Munich apparently. What he had done since was covered sparsely online but I had another connection: Glyn Banks, another former student at Leeds College of Art, had met him in Munich. He emailed me about the experience:

I think Robin Page was in his last year in Leeds when the art school moved into the Polytechnic (and he taught the year above our year). Me and Hannah [Glyn's wife] as [art collective] Art in Ruins were invited to be guest professors for a year in Munich at the Kunst Akademie in 1995 and every time we went there we would see a rugged swashbuckling old geezer with a blue beard and eventually were told by the students that it was Robin Page. Being "post-conceptual" students they considered him slightly suspect but I introduced myself as being from Leeds way back then and we enjoyed many tough drinking sessions with him which surprised everyone. He had been there a long time, maybe after leaving Leeds, and was the only professor there who advertised his studio in the local paper and took people without any qualifications. He had an assistant who was a punk from the town who hitchhiked across Spain dressed as Don Quixote. (Glyn Banks, email, 18 January 2013)

It sounded like Robin Page was still alive and kicking and with a blue beard. However, enquiries to Munich drew a blank. It was only through a network of friends and contemporaries that I eventually found out he was living in Canada. I sent a questionnaire and waited and waited for a response which, when it came, was more than I could have hoped for. Not only did Robin answer my questionnaire, he sent over a recording of himself being interviewed, plus twenty-eight photos of the time. This was incredibly generous of him and the sound of his warm, gravelly old voice (he is now eighty years old) still communicates his rich personality and sense of fun. He had also received a request from another researcher which he refers to in the following transcript, which gives a better picture of what it must have been like to be at Leeds with Robin Page than any reconstruction I could (and did) attempt:

Robin Page: Crazy! Two requests in a week about Leeds! [Laughs]. That's going back some. That's 1965 to 1970, I think it was. . . . How I got into Leeds? Carol and I were living in London and in the *Guardian* every week there were about five or six advertisements, requests in the want ads for lecturers in the art colleges. Incredible! So I managed to get up to Leicester. I was teaching at Leicester on Wednesday and Thursday. I got a gig on Monday at High Wycombe and on Friday I would take the bus over to Coventry for a day, so I was doing four days a week bopping around the North of England. I'd hitchhike up on Tuesday morning and take the bus over on Friday morning to Coventry and take the train back. It was quite a trip. Anyway, in amongst that I was working with Tom Hudson at Leicester for a year or two on his incredible, well intentioned Basic Course which he'd invented with Harry Thubron. I never met the guy.

Anyway we were all meeting up and teaching children to mix colours into wonderful hues and making ticky-tack forms that were all basic. It was all basic, very basic stuff. The problem with the fucking course was that was the only experience the students had and they ended up making art that looked just like the Basic Course [laughs]. Incredible. So never show or teach kids anything because they are going to do exactly what they are told. So anyway I was in Leicester and Patrick Hughes was there too and he got me a gig at Leeds. So he swindled me into Leeds, so I got a senior lectureship at Leeds in 1964 to 1965 — 1965, I guess. That's where it all started. Carol and I moved into a little back-to-back slum on Westfield Road with an outside toilet. Boy, that was the pits of Leeds. [Carol (?) in the background: "Oh yeah."] and then finally we got a place up on Ridge Road, a nice house on Ridge Road, just opposite, what was the name of that . . . ? Sugar Well Hill [This must be Sugar Well Road near Meanwood Ridge]. So I'd walk through the slums every morning to the college and we had a wonderful time. It was a great, great time.

Interviewer: How did you meet George Brecht?

RP: I met George . . . God, I don't even remember when I met George! I met Robert Filliou in Paris in 1960 and he was a buddy of George Brecht and I knew them both. I knew Robert and then I met George somewhere in London and I invited him up to Leeds to do a course. He'd come up for two or three days, a week, a month; it was two weeks, something like that, and he stayed with Caroline and I in Ridge House on Ridge Road and we'd play the piano every night and booze it up and have lots of fun.

Interviewer: Those were the days.

RP: Those were the days, my friend. Then George would go off in the morning whenever his course was, disappear into a room and talk to some students, I guess. I never listened to him. I don't know what his attitude to teaching was or what he

said to anybody; it was none of my fucking business. It was his business [chuckles] and George was George, hermetic, quiet, obscure George. He was very happy doing it then he'd disappear until the next time but what he was doing with those students I have no idea. He would be the last man to teach anybody anything. I don't know how you could make an academic assessment of George Brecht. That's a complete non-starter.

I think he and Robert Filliou had a place in Villefranche — they'd rented a place in Villefranche in the early 1960s sometime — and I think that Robert wrote a book called *Teaching and Learning in Performance Art*. So that's as much as I know about George's attitude to teaching 'cause he would be the last man to teach anybody anything. But if you knew George, he was George, invisible, impossible, delightful George. . . . He did his first conceptual work when he was in the class in 1959 with John Cage in the school in New York. Al Hanson was there too, in that same college; a lot of famous American artists happened to be at the night school with John Cage in 1959. That's what happens . . . and Robert Filliou came up on the same sort of gig. He'd turn up once in a while and do his thing with some students. That's all I know.

A note here on George Brecht and Fluxus in relation to Leeds College of Art: Although Brecht was not forthcoming about his philosophy on art, he is on record as stating that he wanted to take art out of the “concert halls, theatres and art galleries” which he considered “mummifying”. Instead, he and Fluxus artists preferred “streets, homes and railway stations” as venues.¹¹ This attempt to work outside of the official arts system and venues was taken up enthusiastically at Leeds, being pretty much written into the curriculum by the time I arrived there as a student. This was a double-edged sword. It cut through and connected with the most *avant-garde* of American artists in the 1960s, some of whom were at Leeds, but it also served to place the College out of the mainstream. This has become apparent in later accounts of Performance Art in which the Leeds connection has been written out.^{viii}

RP: We were doing our thing with students. I was running a class with Miles McAlinden and I had a gang in the first year, then moved up with them for the second year, so we had them for a couple of years. That was great. We were experimental. It wasn't even experimental; it was the first thing that came to mind (after a good deal of reflection). That was anything but Basic Course — that was basic thinking.

You know, Fluxus was an invented name. Fluxus had hardly got its name by that time. . . . Fluxus was an invented name by George Maciunas for what

viii Compare later accounts of Performance Art with one of the first books to survey the whole scene, Adrian Henri's *Environments and Happenings*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1974.

everyone had been doing in the 1960s. So those happenings and events were a natural process. I was doing them in Paris, I was doing them in London and then I was doing Fluxus. My goodness! It wasn't Fluxus until it was over.

I worked with Cornelius Cardew on his treatise. [Actually] I didn't work with him, I *leaned* on him to finish the treatise score in London. I would visit him and push him to finish the goddamn score because it was so great and we did a concert at the Commonwealth Institute by which time I was exhausted with the sound of rattling screws around and things going *ping, ping, ping*. It's great stuff for the mind. I mean everybody should do experimental music at least once in their life, but once is enough. . . .

Actually, I do have a poster where Cornelius Cardew did come to Leeds. There's a poster with Cornelius Cardew and the AMM which was what this group was called. George Brecht, Tony Scott — who I believe turned out to be Anthony Scott, the film director — who was just a 21-year-old writer at the time, a poet who knew he was going to be famous, and George Brecht and myself. We were there then. Incredible! In Leeds, I mean. Leeds was a **great** place to be because it was “slumsville”. . . .

[Do] You remember the night? It was a student's common room in The Boot and Shoe down on Cookridge Street and we used to hold a bi-weekly or monthly gigs down there doing performances and a dance. I remember a couple of my students [Harvey Royle and Arve Hovig] discovered how you make the slides that go bubbly, bubbly when you project them, psychedelic lights show. They really found out from the guy that had invented it down at Mellor College.

So we had these bubbly walls going; it was psychedelic night in 1965, 1966, with strobe lights and everything and in one of these gigs I got two or three students to equip me with a pile of paper plates, tins of crazy foam and quick as hell we filled them in the basement, these paper plates, and put them in the hall, all around the back of the wall, under the chairs and everywhere without saying a word. We got a lot out and suddenly somebody discovered one and then everybody discovered them and there were paper plates and crazy foam pies flying through the air, *buh, buh, buh, buh, buh, buh, buh, buh, buh*! The place was loaded with people throwing pies at each other. It was beautiful in the strobe light, oh great! And we did performances, stupid and fun things.

Interviewer: Is that where the “Road Show” came from?

RP: It came from everything. The “Road Show” I built with some of my students, five guys and a girl. We built a stage or they built a stage on a trailer. And it opened up; it was like a box trailer. The doors were painted with columns that opened up to make a stage so it was “Professor Protozoa Mini-Majestic Road Show, Yeah!” And we hit the road with that, with little one-minute pieces with five guys and

a girl. Five guys all dressed in white and the girl dressed as a little girl and me looking *burrurr*.^{ix} And we hit the road with that, Carol driving the truck, them all in the back and pulling this rattly trailer behind us down to London.

We went down to the south shore in Brighton. We did a show at the London Festival. We finally got invited to do a show at Woburn Abbey and we arrived at Woburn Abbey the same day as the rain. We were there for two weeks and so was the rain. Well we couldn't play a single show because it pissed with rain for two weeks. So we were broke, out of luck and out of food. And we needed money. I didn't have enough to get us back to Leeds. So what happened? Yeah, I had to send the kids home. And I found some canvas somewhere and I bought it or bought it on credit, made an enclosure in front of the stage, took one of the costumes, a fur coat costume, and turned it into panties [laughs] and made the Wild Man of Woburn. Chained myself up, threw mud all over the walls. Took a bucket of mud every morning, covered myself with it until I was caked, was spitting it out, putting it my mouth and spitting it out all day while chained in there all day and *rahr, rahr, rahr, rahr, buhbrumahyaa!* We made enough money with Carol selling cupcakes of mud to throw at the wild man for ten days or two weeks until we made enough money to get the fuck out of there and get back home. But we managed and Carol said my skin was never so soft. [Laughs with interviewer.] Two weeks in a mud bath.

Interviewer: What about Leeds?

RP: About Leeds? There's [*sic*] stories I don't want to talk about. So I'm answering these guys from Leeds. I'm not going to write all this shit! With my eyes!

Interviewer: So you think Leeds was infused with that Fluxus?

RP: No! If it was it was because I infused it. There were some sleepy fellows there but the 1960s were . . . even stronger than I was and together we were irrepressible because the spirit, the zeitgeist of the 1960s was in the air until everything was possible. It was just that the time was right. I mean I was just up to date with the feelings of five years before and so, and the 1960s were an opening time for adventure and everything and they just came together perfectly, so Leeds happened like everything else. I remember when the kids were protesting in some colleges and they asked our students to join them and they said, "What for? We got everything you're asking for. We already got it." So that was a nice thing to hear back from. . . .

Anyway, what do I want to say about Leeds? I enjoyed myself tremendously. Carol and I loved the adventure and the students and the usual drinks at the Cobourgh every day. Diz Dizley was there one weekend. He tried to get into Leeds.

ix Kevin Smith, John Holt, George Rowbottom, Ollie from Newcastle, Harvey Royal and unidentified girlfriend.

He was a great guitarist and he was feeling a bit down and thought he should study art. I said to him, “I’m not taking you into the class. You’re much too good for this place.” So he’s the guy who took Django Reinhardt’s place with Stefan Grapelli [chuckles]. But, you know, I knew some beautiful people. Patrick [Hughes] and I, or Patrick mostly, managed to help get Anthony Earnshaw into the College out of the factory. That was a beautiful mind and a beautiful man. He was a fine mind and [had] a giggly, silly, wonderful humour. Things like that happen. Leeds happened because things like that happened at the time. . . . There’s so little to say and . . . there’s so little documentation. There’s [*sic*] a few photographs; I’ll try and dig out some of them, but it was done for the joy of doing it and the knowledge of doing it. Now everything’s done for the medium, for its re–presentation. That was done for its presentation.

I loved it there. Carol sewed me a lime green corduroy suit with bell bottoms. It was great. I’d walk across the slums in this lime green suit every morning feeling like a million dollars, just enjoying being there. By the time the College turned into a polytechnic by 1970 or something, the whole game was over. The 1960s was over and so was the College and Ricky Atkinson moved on to Canada, to London, Ontario, where he’s been for years and doing a wonderful job and the [job of] Head of Department got taken over by Willy Turr. . . .

So, what do I know about Leeds? I had a wonderful time. We did some wonderful things and we laughed a hell of a lot. That’s the important thing. Apart from that, I’ll try and dig out some photographs which I treasure, the few I have for my book when I decide to . . . [laughs deeply]. So good luck, guys. I can’t tell you much because remembering it . . . it’s inside me. I am a product of that. It doesn’t peel off in words; my person is the real product of that period. And I’m sure the students had the experience we had and at least we didn’t give them false directions. They found their own false directions [wry laugh]. So, good luck, guys. If you need to know anything else, please ask somebody else ’cause I’ve missed so much but so have *youuu* [chuckles]. So, good luck for your hunt for the truth about what really happened. Jilly Flesch, one of the students, she wrote a book and she ended it, “What happened?” She and Carol were big friends. Anyway. Good luck. I’m going to have a beer now and fuck you.

Now that’s a great way to end an interview — particularly one that had him summoning up so many memories from the past. Robin Page’s delivery communicates a vivid image of the man and his time at Leeds. His warm hearted, irrepressible energy comes across. And what had he said? “Never show or teach kids anything because they are going to do exactly what they are told.” This was what he believed and lived his life by and this was to be his legacy. Robin’s teaching philosophy was to continue after he had left. It worked for him because he was an energetic and charismatic artist who

could inspire students and engage them in his own work. This wasn't ever going to be the case for all tutors but this "hands-off" approach to teaching was widely adopted and was certainly my experience. It was down to you to solve your own creative problems. You could ask of course, but who was ever going to do that?

What we had instead was a palimpsest; the original operating instructions had been erased but they were being rewritten every year and only if you stayed around long enough would you be able to see the pattern repeating. It went all the way back to Harry Thubron and Herbert Read, who argued as far back as 1943 that the individual could grow up as an integrated, creative being only "if early, largely inborn creative abilities were not repressed by conventional Education".¹² In the case of the art students, "creative abilities" consisted of their uniqueness, the thing that marked out their art and identified their particular genius, and, at the very least, their talent. This was to be preserved at all costs, the accepted wisdom being that unlimited self-expression was the gateway to creativity. Any restrictions to this, including teaching or following existing paradigms, were viewed sceptically.

Robin Page was committed to doing crazy, amazing things and it worked for him. His own creative evolution was marching in step with the times. In fact, he was the cheerleader, as can be seen from his own account and as he acknowledged: "[T]he 1960s were . . . even stronger than I was and together we were irrepressible because the spirit, the zeitgeist of the 1960s was in the air until everything was possible. It was just that the time was right." Assaults on existing forms and institutions were a hallmark of 1960s cultural radicalism. Robin Page brought this with him to Leeds, but he also brought a playfulness and intellect which endeared him to his students.

Photographs from the time show him lying naked on the floor at his house for his event, "Merry Christmas '66", which involved having presents dropped on top of him until his nakedness was covered. Robin thanked everybody for their kindness in a sort of reversal of Yoko Ono's invitation for people to cut away her clothes.

Earlier in the year, a photograph in the *Daily Mirror* showed him sat with his feet in a hole that he had just dug in the basement floor of a bookshop on the Charing Cross Road. The article reports that Mr Page, a lecturer at Leeds College of Art, was offering the hole for sale as a work of art for £125. This was a typically profound Page prank, but what was more important to him was the process: "It was beautiful, beautiful. But I had to stop because I could not do anymore. Now I have no more doubts about Art. This is what it is all about."¹³ Robin Page's belief in the process rather than the result (a finished art object) can be seen as a logical extension of Harry Thubron's original promotion of this concept. Page, however, takes the whole thing up several levels. The object was actually beginning to disappear altogether, a concept that was becoming prevalent in *avant-garde* circles by the end of the 1960s. Robin Page had already contributed to this debate but, in his usual humorous way, photographs show him handing out leaflets to bemused shoppers in Leeds city centre. The leaflet reads,

“This was just handed to you by Robin Page now tear it up and throw it away and forget it.” This is very Fluxus, but it’s also very Robin Page. As he had said, “Fluxus was an invented name by George Maciunas for what everyone had been doing in the 1960s.”^x

Robin Page had his own take on Fluxus which was more fun orientated than serious, although he was aware of all the neo-Dadaist implications and influences in his work. Page seems to have hidden his academic and painterly credentials behind the prankster’s mask. He was an accomplished draughtsman and painter when he chose to be and was well up to speed with all of the latest *avant-garde* concepts. He was exploring areas in which the term “art” becomes meaningless, in which the art exists as a constructed moment in time and the serious names and concepts break down, ideally torpedoed by some crazy tomfoolery.

This deflationary stance was to become characteristic of Leeds after Robin Page. The art I saw at Leeds seemed easier to do and more fun than I could have imagined. I managed to reverse this, but it took some application. In this I was aided by a complete ignorance of the history behind what had almost become a tradition at Leeds. But as I burrowed further into the archives and talked to more and more people, I discovered that I had stepped onto a train of events at a critical phase in its forward momentum.

Page had said, “Good luck for your hunt for the truth about what really happened.” That was it exactly: I was hunting for information, stuff that was off the radar, not written down in the official account but actually much more interesting. Take this email from Jenny Webb, an outstanding student, flamboyant, gregarious and attractive. I had asked her about Patrick Hughes:

He was a randy sod and had a fling with Jill Flesch in my year. She was a really crazy rich American and lovely personality-wise. In the summer after our first year she went to [the] US and Patrick went to work at the Barry Summer School, where he met Molly Parkin and that was that. They married and he left at the end of that year [1969]. . . . Patrick was/is a very witty man, as is his work. [He was a] Smooth, cynical, urbane, *raconteur*, ideas man — students made his work, I think. Outrageous remarks — one felt one had arrived if you made him laugh and I did sometimes. (Jenny Webb, email, 10 February 2013)

x George Maciunas went on to define Fluxus in his 1963 *Fluxus Manifesto*: “FLUX ART — non art — amusement forgoes distinction between art and non-art forgoes artists’ indispensability, exclusiveness, individuality, ambition, forgoes all pretension towards a significance, variety, inspiration, skill, complexity, profundity, greatness, institutional and commodity value. It strives for non-structural, non-theatrical, non-baroque, impersonal qualities of a simple natural event, an object, a game, a puzzle or a gag. It is a fusion of Spike Jones, gags, games, Vaudeville, Cage and Duchamp.” (Extract from *Fluxus Manifesto*, 1963 by George Maciunas. Quoted in Henri, *Environments and Happenings*.)

I have a couple of books on and by Patrick Hughes. In 1975, he co-wrote *Vicious Circles and Infinity: An Anthology of Paradoxes* with George Brecht, who he was at Leeds with. My copy was a wine stained Penguin paperback and it was a book to dip into and reel back from, trying to disentangle the mental contradictions that the paradoxes set in motion. Both in his paintings and his writings, Hughes has directed his formidable intellect towards revealing where logic breaks down, where language shoots itself in the foot and philosophy arrives at a zero point. It seemed a sort of perverse pleasure for him and the other book I had, his biography by John Slyce, titled *Patrick Hughes: Perversepective* (1998), emphasised the centrality of his fascination with all things contrary to appearances in his work.

Hughes is a literary painter, which was, and is, unusual, the Greenbergian^{xi} argument being that painting should address itself and avoid fakery — i.e. illusions such as perspective — and should certainly never tell a story. When Hughes was at Leeds beginning his career, literary painting was the darkest anathema. Yet Hughes characteristically set himself against the prevailing orthodoxies and came up with his own take on abstraction. He painted pictures that on one level were hard-edge colourful abstracts and on another were recognisable objects, a style most acutely apparent in his painting, *Liquorice Allsorts* (1960). Hughes was beginning to look beyond abstraction towards Pop Art and Surrealism.

Hughes pursued his early interest in Magritte and Duchamp and was aware of Paolozzi's early essays into pop culture while still working in London.¹⁴ Yet his original interest was in writing, and when he came up to Leeds with his family in 1959, he enrolled as a student, training to teach English. However, as he wrote later, things took a different turn:

When I went to the James Graham College I wanted to study literature but first we had to have [an] examination writing freely about authors that we liked. As I remember I wrote about Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Samuel Butler, Kafka, Christian Morgenstern and Ionesco. Mrs Hanson who was teaching English there at the time thought it was more advisable that I should do Art. My educators in art at John Graham College were John Jones and Muriel Atkinson. They ran a six-week basic course (it was based on the Basic Course here); and then allowed personal development for the rest of two years. I personally developed.¹⁵

Hughes used his time to great effect. Confident and curious, he explored his interests, and by the end of the two years could say that he had benefitted from an art education that would stay with him for the rest of his life. He put the efficacy of the course down

xi Influential American art critic and essayist Clement Greenberg discovered Jackson Pollock and promoted Abstract Expressionism to great effect during the 1950s. His theories are discussed in more depth in Chapter 3.

to the fact “That the onus was placed on the student not only to work but to study and explore other people’s work. That an environment of studio, library and permissiveness was cultivated. And most important that this particular student wanted to say things in paint rather than paint, period.”¹⁶

How much Hughes had benefitted from his two years as an art student was confirmed by his successful debut show at the Portal Galley in London, which opened just two days after he graduated. His talent was recognised by the London critics, although, according to his biographer John Slyce, they focussed on the joke element of his paintings at the expense of the more serious Duchampian concepts he was presenting. This may be true, but perhaps the joke itself ought to be taken more seriously. As Robin Page asked in one of his paintings, “Hey, Whildon, why has humour never replaced seriousness as the most respectable cultural attitude?” Answer: “Because people can’t fake it!” Hughes and Robin Page shared this recognition of the profundity of the absurd and the understanding that the joker can reveal the truth and the artist and prankster can be one and the same. This attitude was one that was able to flourish at Leeds and that united the two artists of wildly different personalities. Having heard from Robin Page, I needed now to speak to Patrick Hughes.

It was the ex-Leeds student and magician, Paul “Sonny” Hayes, a friend of Patrick Hughes’ for many years, who gave me an introduction to him. He did, however, warn me that Patrick could be quite opinionated and liked to speak at length on his chosen subjects. Undeterred, I was very grateful to Sonny for this connection and was able to arrange an interview with Patrick via his secretary for early March. I went down to London with the Robin Page CD as a gift and, feeling in one of my more confident moods, I called in at his gallery, Angela Flowers, which coincidentally was showing work by Boyd and Evans, who had both studied in Leeds. From there it was a short walk to his studio in Hoxton.

The studio and offices were housed in an impressive high Victorian building which was even more imposing inside, where I was introduced to four of Patrick’s assistants. They were working away at his paintings, completing them with a meticulous drawing and painting of the detailed images on canvases jutting out in reverse perspective. These were being completed for Patrick’s forthcoming show in Los Angeles. Clearly Patrick Hughes was a successful artist and he very much looked the part with his flamboyant shirt, black and red braces and rimless glasses on an alert, angular face. For seventy-four years old, he looked remarkably fit, and indeed he had been out running that morning. Once I had decided where to do the interview — against a backdrop of his unpainted reverse perspective canvases — Patrick answered my questions about Leeds in his typically candid way pretty well from the word “go”.

In answer to my standard opening question, “What were your first impressions of Leeds College of Art?”, he instead and more interestingly told me how he got the job there:

I was standing in the Wren's Public House in the *pissoir*, against the piss stone as we called it, when Ricky Atkinson came and stood next to me. I suppose it was early 1964 and he said, "Would you like to have a job at Leeds with me?" It was three days a week part time. It was an immense sum, perhaps £100 a day and I said, "Certainly."

Somehow I don't think job recruitment like that could happen today. Universities and colleges have become hugely regulated and freedoms once taken for granted have disappeared, probably forever. 1964 was a good time to be a Fine Art lecturer: not only were you free to teach without petty restrictions, but you were also amazingly well paid, particularly in light of the fact that the average weekly wage in the UK for that year was £16 per week.¹⁷ Lecturers continued to be very well paid into the 1970s and could consequently afford to ignore the market.

Hughes would have appreciated the paradox of *avant-garde* artists devising strategies to resist the commodification of art while receiving fat pay cheques. Although his own work had a different focus, Hughes, as ever, was aware of recent developments in art and had first encountered Robin Page in 1962 at Gallery One's *Festival of Misfits* in London, where Page was exploring the Fluxian concept of useless work. No doubt the paradox appealed, as did the Canadian artist's warm personality. In any event, Hughes invited Page to Leeds and secured him a senior lectureship at Leeds in 1964. When I spoke to Hughes, he displayed a huge affection and respect for Page and his work and had a fine, meticulously rendered painting by him in his studio.

Patrick Hughes was also able to give me some fresh information on Harry Thubron. When he arrived in Easter 1956, he began reforms in art education which were to be incorporated into the Diploma in Art and Design (DipAD) and expanded nationally following moves towards greater autonomy for art colleges, recommended by the National Advisory Committee on Art Examinations (NACAE) and later the First Coldstream Report of 1960.¹⁸ So, Hughes told me, Thubron had decided early on that "There won't be a painting department. There won't be a sculpture department. It will all be one department and that's what obtains at Goldsmiths today and that was his revolution if you like."

This concept was something that his mentor Kurt Schwitters had been working with for many years. Schwitters had been living in Ambleside since 1945 after fleeing Germany, where his Dada-inspired activities and *avant-garde* art had put him at grave risk from the ascendant Nazi party. Thubron met Schwitters in London and, according to Hughes, "Harry [Thubron] was in his own work an exemplar of Schwitter's technique, making collage, slightly 3D collage, cut out of rubbish." Later on in the interview, Patrick returned to this topic, bringing in the Goldsmiths connection:

[I]n the end, [Thubron] went to Goldsmiths and his wife Elma was still filling the place with rubbish and Damien Hirst was still picking up on this rubbish and hence the YBAs [Young British Artists]. In the end, what Harry created

anticipated the YBAs with a big forty year gap in between. That's where his legacy is. He would have hated it of course, but the first works of Damien Hirst were like Harry's, like Schwitters's: rubbish. Which can be inspirational.

What Hughes refers to as "rubbish" tends to be dignified by the term "found object" once incorporated into a collage. Damien Hirst's early student work does seem to owe something to Harry Thubron, whose work he was aware of while studying at Jacob Kramer (later renamed Leeds College of Art) in 1983.¹⁹ Coincidentally, Harry Thubron was teaching part time at Goldsmiths between 1971 and 1982, and a posthumous exhibition of his work was held there in 1986, the same year Damien Hirst arrived as a student.

However, all of this is circumstantial and I think it was Thubron's breaking of rules and blurring of boundaries that made him a modern artist and, as Hughes seems to be suggesting, is his legacy. Thubron's ideas and methods have been so assimilated that it is difficult to see how influential they have been. Patrick Hughes has a long memory and his version of events is worth taking at face value. He met Thubron a few times but did not, he said, warm to him. Hughes was more impressed with Marcel Duchamp, whom he met in 1966.^{xii} Duchamp's elegant iconoclasm contrasted with Thubron's ragged bohemianism. This was in sharp contrast to Hughes' more dandified and precise nature — indeed, Hughes claims he detected an underlying anarchism in Thubron's character. As an example of this, he told a story about visiting Thubron's house to be confronted with three televisions in a tower, one on top of the other. Every time one broke, Harry just went out and bought another one and stuck it on top of the one below, building up a precarious column of junk technology. This was maybe more lazy bohemian than anarchist, but it was very much in keeping with Thubron's disdain for convention. He followed his own convictions and these produced far-reaching changes, setting in motion an environment in which experimental art would flourish far beyond his original intentions.

In this regard, it's worth looking at the experience of John Holt, a student who began at Leeds College of Art in 1966, a mere two years after Thubron's departure. He described his diploma show as

A performance which included occult animated movies, the shaving of the head and the burning of all the money I had: I was stripped bare and sacrificed on an altar ridding myself of ego, of my past and being re-born to myself, the world and to my audience. . . . I had blown up the world, and carried out evil acts prior to my re-birth. I had some of my fellow students working throughout the piece one evangelical Christian selling bibles, others playing table tennis as they shared their mannerisms and obsessions with the audience.

xii Email from Patrick Hughes 9 October 2013: "I did meet Duchamp once, Man Ray a few times. I interviewed Meret Oppenheim one day, and I knew Marcel Marien quite well. I met Duchamp in 1966 when I was teaching at Leeds."

This was an audience of external examiners, including Patrick Heron, who saw fit to award John Holt a first. It is a tribute to the openness of the College that it could accommodate such diversions from the putative curriculum and allow John Holt and his fellow student Jeff Whittaker to explore such esoteric diversions:

Leeds gave us the space, the creative sanctuary within which to take tentative steps to what we felt was an inner space. I cannot remember however discussing the “spiritual realm” with any tutor at any time. The world of *avant-garde* art at Leeds was not one that took a mystical path. This was a complicit understanding between Jeff and I. William Blake, Samuel Palmer [and] Casper David Friedrich were the ilk of artist we loved. We read Jung, Rudolph Steiner, the mystic poets, Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. I read the works of John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila, Simone Weil. We did daily yoga, became Rosicrucian.

Holt and Whittaker can be seen as part of what has been characterised as the “mystic sixties”, an occult revival whose influence was deeply prevalent through the decade. As Gary Valentine Lachman has noted, “There was no central argument, except the belief that modern science, with its materialist mechanist vision had too narrow a view of a man and the world.”²⁰ In this scenario, the alternative and mystical were far more valued than mere rationality, not least because they were colourful and strange. Leeds College of Art managed to encompass these fringe ideas along with *avant-garde* art, two pursuits not generally considered good bedfellows. Nevertheless, John Holt enjoyed working and travelling with Robin Page on his legendary “Road Show” and taking part in events organised by George Brecht, Cornelius Cardew and Bruce Lacey. Perhaps it was this exposure to art as an acted out experience that instigated his life-long commitment to using art as means of accessing the spiritual life and self-knowledge. What is certain is that by the end of his student years, he had gone a long way from the original Basic Course.

John Holt and Jeff Whittaker were working in an area somewhere between art and life and perhaps it was not surprising that I first encountered them living with Peter Parr, who was not averse to performing his own magic rituals. John describes him exorcising his room with a circle of blood — his own, fortunately. But while the foibles of the “mystic sixties” are history, some of the more serious concerns have had a lasting effect. John Holt has devoted his life to working with the marginalised and mentally ill using art as a healing device and a means of self-realisation. He is a recognised authority in this field, building on his original insight of the potential for art to be a means of reaching and expressing mystical states. He is adamant that it was the opportunity he had at Leeds to follow his own inclinations that has shaped his life. While John Holt may be one of the few students who have adhered to his original course, he is certainly not alone in acknowledging the lifelong impression that the experience of being a student at Leeds College of Art made upon him, as we shall see.