

# Foreword

I taught at Leeds between 1964 and 1970 and became an external assessor there 1971–1975. During the 1980s, I was an external assessor at Goldsmiths (1982–1984), where I later went on to teach (1986–1987). Harry Thubron, who, as Head of Fine Art at Leeds, invented the modern art school in the late 1950s, went on to conclude his career at Goldsmiths, where, with his follower Jon Thompson, he implemented the same ideas. Goldsmiths students, who made up the bulk of the Young British Artists (YBAs), were building on concepts first explored at Leeds College of Art in the 1960s.

The revolution in British art schools had to take place in the twentieth century because, until 1963, it had been a centralised system in which after four years of training, each student had to send in a canvas of a prescribed size on a prescribed theme to the Victoria and Albert Museum, where Royal Academicians would be waiting to judge them. With the new three-year Diploma in Art and Design of 1963, the art schools could award their own degree-level qualification with external assessors chosen by the schools themselves.

The idea behind the revolution was to drag the art schools into the twentieth century, to get the students to practice modern experimental art instead of pursuing academic compositions with figures. Harry Thubron saw that as long as Fine Art was divided into Painting and Sculpture, art education itself was a house divided. He was a follower of Kurt Schwitters, who in his various Merzbau had abolished this petty distinction. Leeds College of Art students regularly visited the extant Merzbau in Ambleside, travelling by charabanc. By doing away with the Sculpture Department, Harry opened the way to three-dimensional collages and Performance Art, and, as James Charnley tells us so brilliantly and cogently, it soon became “anything goes”.

For the new wave of art education, the challenge was how to make an academic discipline out of twentieth-century art practice. The initial feeling was that all art tended towards the abstract and Abstract Expressionism; colour, materials and form were endlessly analysed and the musical analogy of art as a feeling and a structure of tones and rhythms was pursued. But knowledge of innovations in the art world like Pop Art, Fluxus and Performance Art soon swamped abstract art. During my time

at Leeds, I arranged regular lectures by *avant-garde* artists, including Walter de Maria, Yoko Ono, Cornelius Cardew, Ivor Cutler, John Tilbury, Jasia Reichardt, Bruce Lacey and a hundred others who brought news from afar every week for six years. All of these influences fed into and progressed the Leeds experiment.

At best, an undergraduate education in art is going to be centred around learning what other people — grown-ups — have found out. Teenagers are opinionated at the best of times, and sometimes believe that what they have found discarded in the gutter of culture is a great invention or discovery that they have personally made. The young art student is often a hero-worshipper, and there is a deplorable tendency in art lecturers to seek followers and disciples, which I have sadly seen, but not at the Leeds I knew. By some fluke of social organisation, groups of disparate people can form powerful units and the whole will be greater than the parts. Luckily for the Leeds students of the generation that James Charnley is writing about, there were many magical moments at Leeds when the Principal, Eric Taylor, and the Heads of Department, first Ricky Atkinson and then Willy Turr (who took the trouble to visit Hans Bellmer in Paris), gave teaching staff their permission to innovate. Despite an appalling tendency to appoint ex-students — always a mistake of in-breeding and patronage — charismatic teachers like Miles McAlinden and Robin Page transcended the times and lifted student work to great heights. They inspired, cajoled and prodded a generation. Some remarkable local talents like Tony Earnshaw put their spoke in. At this time, there were forty-five art schools, but only one mattered.

These days, we are all surrealists and the pretend lunatics have taken over that asylum from the real world that is the art world. Art now is random and silly and self-indulgent and the cult of the personality rules. The bohemian has become academic. Leeds showed the way and the art world followed. What James Charnley has done so thoughtfully in this unique book has been to bring together elements of personal biography — both his and others' — set against the changes in further education, in society and in the world of art. It is an archaeology of the recent past that by slicing through the rich layer cake of Leeds art education shows us the human stories of imaginative and yearning young people.

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