Introduction

We talked of things which no longer existed.

James Salter, *A Sport and a Pastime*[1]

Why should we be interested in the fate of a provincial art college at the end of the 1960s? Perhaps because the art college in question was widely recognised as the most influential in Europe. Leeds College of Art was at the top of its game when, in 1970, along with almost all of the other art colleges in the country, it was merged into the new polytechnics.[i] This merger, or "murder", as the artist and writer Patrick Heron termed it,[2] was the result of proposals first put forward in 1966 by the Labour government, intended to democratise and modernise tertiary education. The polytechnics were to provide an education designed to meet the demands of industry, with an emphasis on practical knowledge. As such, it was felt that the art colleges, with their hands–on approach to learning, could be put in the same box. Backed by generous provisions and an optimistic belief that this was the way forward, the fate of the old autonomous art colleges was sealed. Leeds College of Art offers an ideal case study of what happened next, what was gained and also what was lost when the new regime was inaugurated.

This account focusses on the activities of students and staff on the Fine Art course at Leeds College of Art during the 1960s and early 1970s. It was during this time that the *avant-garde* reputation of the College was established. This recognition depended on the constant redefining of the limits of art and education, on pushing the boundaries beyond what was accepted and often on courting controversy. To expect that such a

i The polytechnics later became the new universities. Thus, in 1992, Leeds Polytechnic became Leeds Metropolitan University and in 2014, Leeds Beckett University. During their twenty–two year lifespan, the polytechnics were primarily intended to provide a practical education in science and technology, although the humanities were also included in the Labour government's (1964–1970) plan to modernise and democratise higher education. See also Chapter 4.

revolutionary ethos could be neatly accommodated into the formal constraints of a technologically–based institution was, at the very least, optimistic, a fact alluded to in the Fine Art Department's Quinquennial Review of 1976:

> Historically, attempts to marry art and technology in education have always proved difficult, and the relationship remains as uneasy as that between the artist and the scholar. [The] past two centuries have seen a wide rift open up in society, dividing classic culture from romantic counter culture, each alienated from the other. This dichotomy means that people tend to think exclusively in one mode or the other — order, control, economy, restraint versus feeling, intuition and aesthetic conscience.[3]

The judicious language of the review only hints at what occurred when the unrestrained *avant-garde* activities of the Fine Art Department, fuelled by subversive counter–cultural ideals, was introduced into a regime unprepared for such excesses and intending to pursue a deeply practical agenda. By the end of the 1960s, the Leeds Fine Art Department was at its most adventurous, but also at its most uncontained. This tendency was only to increase over the following decade, with a growing emphasis on the shock value of extreme performances — so much so that there was even an element of predictability in the latest reported outrage.

When I first began to research and write an account of Leeds Fine Art in the Polytechnic, my intention was to cover the five years between 1968 and 1973. I chose these years because, as far as I knew, nobody had written about the events of this most fascinating and crucial time. Certainly from our present perspective it seems astonishing that many of the events I recount could have been allowed, much less encouraged. Yet the prevailing ethos at Leeds was to take things that little bit further. I was there as a student 1970–1973, and, like many others, could testify to an atmosphere that combined a sense of brilliant creativity and imminent crisis. This was a strange time: all of the benefits of the decade's investment in education were in place, students had generous grants and tutors were well paid and, compared to academic staff today, had few demands made on them. There were few rules and it often seemed that the ones that existed were there to be broken. But how long could such a situation continue? By the early 1970s, there was already a feeling that the forward momentum was unsustainable. What had made Leeds Fine Art great also had the potential to bring about a crisis.

A parallel development can be seen within the counter–culture, a mass movement that emerged at around the same time. Its defining features were the rejection of the existing order and an exploration of alternative values and lifestyles. The most visible manifestations of this were in the music and fashions of the 1960s, towards which the art schools contributed much. Yet there was a more subversive philosophy underlying the long haired, joint–smoking hippies who came to represent the counter–culture.

There was an attempt made to create a new society in which there were none of the old restraints, which were seen as antithetical to freedom and creativity. To this end, there was much experimentation with drugs, communal living and the breaking of taboos, both sexual and social. During the 1960s, the counter-culture moved from a fringe movement to the mainstream and eventually became a victim of its own success. Bohemia became all but institutionalised and, what's worse, the revolution had not lived up to its promises. By the end of the decade, there was a feeling of cynicism and betrayal. The original impetus was exhausted and there was less a feeling of arrival than a need for a new departure, a need to take things up to the next level.

It can be argued that developments at Leeds College of Art followed a similar route. The rejection of the existing order in art and art education that began with Harry Thubron and flowered during the 1960s produced a revolution in creative expression. In a sense, Leeds embodied many of the values of the counter-culture, as all perceived restraints on expression were removed and radical new forms were actively pursued. Thus there existed a sort of symbiosis between the art college and the counter-culture, with the college providing a laboratory for the exploration of radical concepts whereby art and life could become interchangeable and imagination reified. It was a place where Surrealism and Happenings flourished, the latter seguing into Performance Art. Fluxus-inspired activities intent on debunking the seriousness and pretence of art defined the Leeds ethos, producing much of the Fine Art Department's signature work. As an art movement, Fluxus came closest to promoting and embodying the original counter-cultural values. Fluxus was anti-commercial and pro-anything alternative. Its artists attacked fixed concepts on art with activities and attitudes that could neither be owned nor exploited.

A further correspondence between the art college and the counter-culture must be admitted: both were avowedly non-materialistic. The art college could afford to be, since the taxpayer was footing the bill. Meanwhile, the original idealism of the counter-culture was lost as the opportunities to make money increased and the drugs, once seen as liberating, became a predictable and arguably damaging fixture.[ii]

In spite of this, by the *fin de sixties,* the influence of the counter-culture was conclusive and Leeds had earned its reputation as the most progressive and adventurous art college in Europe, with its influence even extending as far as the USA, where the art colleges had some catching up to do. Yet as an *avant-garde* institution, Leeds could not afford to stand still. The forward momentum had to be maintained. This was the challenge that faced students and staff of the Fine Art Department entering the new Polytechnic with its vast and pristine white studio

ii Beer remained an inspirational constant with alcohol-fuelled debates in the pubs around the College providing a forum for ideas and the hatching out of schemes, some even art related.

in 1970. This was the time I arrived at Leeds as a student and first encountered the prevailing ethos which, unbeknown to me, had a history and a pedigree. What was apparent was that all art students were expected to be as original and creative as possible.

There were no boundaries — these had been demolished during the 1960s. Art could be whatever you wanted it to be; no form of expression was barred and "the only thing forbidden was to be dull".[4] This was according to Jeff Nuttall, the poet, performance artist and influential Polytechnic lecturer who was to be a key player in the scenario. Jeff had been one of the founders of the counter–culture, organising some of the earliest Happenings, and, in writing *Bomb Culture*, producing a seminal work on what became known as the Underground. *Bomb Culture* was written from bitter experience as Jeff saw the movement's idealism corrupted even as the revolutionaries gained influence, if not power. He was teaching Fine Art at Leeds when I arrived there, although he did not teach in any traditional sense; rather, he set an example, quite often a bad one. But in spite of this, he was warm and encouraging and hugely gifted. Nuttall was a consummate polymath, and perhaps also a pied piper. To be anything but dull was to encourage excess and exhibitionism and Leeds College of Art had acquired a name for such things. Being there, one felt a pressure to continue the tradition.

The anarchic regime within the Fine Art Department led to all sorts of fascinating and outrageous events being perpetrated by students and staff. Artists and aspiring artists all sought to make a mark, to be taken seriously or, at the very least, to be noticed. In spite of a lack of rules and discipline, creativity was rigidly enforced, and at a high level. Art and life were being conflated, since what art had become was so open–ended that it merged with life. Once any act could, in theory, be designated a work of art, then how was it separate from life? This conception made its own demands and required a particular sensibility, strategy and lifestyle. At the time, the influential German Fluxus artist and shaman, Joseph Beuys, was saying that everyone was an artist, but, in that case, who was any good? This question was being actively explored at Leeds when I arrived, and had been for several years previously. In this, the college was reflecting the state of *avant-garde* art at the time.

There is also a parallel to be found between the development of *avant-garde* art and art education at Leeds College of Art in the 1960s. During this time, new paradigms were established, only to be demolished shortly after as artists assaulted the very basis of what art could be. Radical movements quickly became old hat as new art forms emerged every year. By the end of the decade, Abstract Expressionism, once the test bed of Modernism, had been displaced first by Pop Art and then by Conceptual and Performance Art, both of which dismissed the necessity of having a permanent, tangible art object. A performance lasted the duration of its enactment and then disappeared. It was the actions and ideas that were important now.

All of these progressions were reflected in the way that art was taught at Leeds, and, by the time I arrived, had gradually resulted in a removal of all of the rules. The art object was disappearing, or perhaps assuming new forms, becoming a process, an event, even a journey, and this was what I encountered at Leeds in all of its wild confusion and brilliance. Even forty years later, I am impressed at just what was achieved and at what cost. In the end, the attempt to forge a new art, one that could resist commodification, was utopian. The 1960s came to an end, to be replaced by the grimmer and grimier realities of the 1970s. What happened at Leeds has since been neglected, written out of art history, known only to those who were there.

As I began to piece the bigger picture together, I came to realise that the end of the 1960s at Leeds was also the culmination of an ongoing experiment. At its simplest, the hypothesis was that greater freedom would lead to greater creativity. As fresh-faced students, we had been parachuted into this experiment and expected to take it to the next stage. What this entailed, nobody could tell, including the tutors — some of whom had been contributing to the experiment since the 1950s. Modern art then seemed simpler and more heroic. The enemy was mimesis, ornament was to be decried and truth to materials was everything, as the first few pioneers assailed the walls of tradition and flattened them — literally in the case of abstraction, which banished the "fakery" of three-dimensional space in painting. Leeds College of Art had been at the forefront of this revolution, and, throughout the 1960s, made ever more daring excursions into the future of art, re-engaging with Dada and its anarchic concepts ideally suited to the prevailing iconoclasm. So, as art was demolished via Duchampian dialectics, so too were the concepts of art education at Leeds. As students, we had arrived at the climax of this experiment.

As I talked to and corresponded with tutors and students who were at Leeds College of Art during the 1960s, I came to realise that if I wanted to explain what had happened then, I needed to consider the back-story. What had happened in the early 1960s had built the platform on which we had landed. As my research extended back through the history of Leeds College of Art, it seemed that the experiment had begun with the input of Harry Thubron. As Head of Painting at Leeds, he had begun the process of bringing art education up to speed with the most recent developments in contemporary art. When I began to write this account, Thubron's contribution had already been recognised and documented, as had that of his successor, Eric Atkinson, who left the College just before I arrived. There seemed, however, to be a great deal more to the story than what had already been written up.

My account is based on primary sources, interviews and correspondence with people who were at Leeds College of Art and later the Polytechnic at the time. These include key figures like Eric Atkinson, Patrick Hughes, Robin Page, Miles McAlinden, John Fox and many, many more. Indeed, the problem has been to reduce the vast amount of information collected and make it as manageable and coherent as possible. Much has had to be left out.

Besides the artists and tutors mentioned above, I also contacted the art students of the era, who inspired me to begin this project in the first place. Sonny Hayes, Simon English and John Ross have been particularly helpful.[iii] The assistance I was given by so many other students has been phenomenally generous and I have tried to do them justice. I only refrain from naming them now because the list could not be satisfactorily inclusive. They are all acknowledged, and several, including Kevin Atherton and Rose English, are discussed in detail, as they demonstrate a particular aspect of the Leeds ethos. To this must be added the poet George Szirtes and Philip "Mack" Matthews, two artists whose methods were vastly different, but whose creativity was shared and able to flourish at Leeds.

During my research I interviewed or corresponded with over sixty witnesses and, in doing so, encountered a consensus that this was a story that needed telling. I hope that I have been able to do this by reconstructing some of the key events and the people involved. It was also a story that needed explaining. For me, this was crucial, since I wanted to understand what had happened and why. This then is also an investigation of art as life at Leeds and how it manifested during a time of unprecedented creative freedom and plenteous resources, conditions that are extremely unlikely to be repeated.

Although there have been previous histories of Leeds College of Art, these have only told part of the story and do not consider 1969 and beyond, when the College became part of Leeds Polytechnic. The dynamics of the late 1960s were complex. How could the *avant-garde* project at Leeds progress? What forms would the new art take? What were the consequences of complete creative freedom? How could the conflicting objectives of the Polytechnic and art school be resolved? What effect did events in the wider society have? Social, political, economic and cultural factors all had an impact on the Leeds ethos, and, by 1973, there had been a noticeable shift in outlook. The optimism of the 1960s was being supplanted by the economic realities of the 1970s. How could fine art, with its rejection of material and practical concerns, continue to justify the privileged status it enjoyed? This question became even more pointed when the type of work produced did not conform to any formal criteria.

What can be said with certainty is that the most outstanding students had the best time at Leeds. They knew what they wanted to do and were given the opportunity to do more. Others, and I include myself, found the lack of boundaries quite intimidating. In the creative free–for–all where art could be almost anything, I managed, only after many mistakes, to find a way forward. For me, the course was a rite of passage, as it was for many. I had expected that art school might teach me to be an artist; but in fact what the curriculum offered was what Rose English has called "the pedagogy of permission". You could do whatever you wanted, but with nobody there to insist on anything one way or the other, you were thrown onto your own resources. Ultimately, everything was down to you. That was to be the lesson that Leeds taught me and everybody who was there.

iii Peter Parr was also inspirational but could not be contacted as he died in November 2012.

Since then it has become apparent that the practice of art in academia has changed fundamentally. During the 1990s, it became possible to pursue a PhD in Art, a reflection of the reformulating of Fine Art as a university subject. Theory has been elevated and craft based skills further denigrated, a tendency that began in Leeds during the mid–twentieth century. Paradoxically, Leeds, having originally pioneered this *avant-garde* approach to the teaching of art, was to become a victim of it during the 1970s. By that time, it seemed that Leeds lacked an underpinning theory and structure. Fine Art students gained a reputation for outrageous performances that now seem indulgent, even silly. Leeds was outflanked by the rise of artists as intellectuals, able to develop within an increasingly academic *milieu* and justify their esoteric artworks. Language became as important as visual art, and perhaps more so. Artists who controlled the language of art controlled its history and retrospectively came to represent the *avant-garde*. The Leeds school did not have a place in this narrative.

I have attempted to present a coherent account of what was a profoundly unstructured phenomenon. So, encouraged by my editor, I have divided the book into three sections. Part 1, "Leeds College of Art Rising", covers the years 1963 to 1969, during which the autonomous Leeds College of Art gained a reputation for *avant-garde* experimentation shot through with an exuberant anarchy. If anything, this tendency increased with the insertion of the radical Fine Art Department into the Polytechnic. These events are covered in Part 2, "The Pirates of the Polytechnic", which describes an ethos of art and education with no prescribed boundaries meeting a Polytechnic system with an altogether different agenda. Ultimately, it was the Polytechnic that prevailed, but not during the years of my account (1969–1973) and not until the polytechnics had become universities, a change in name that finalised a change in purpose: the new universities were fundamentally academic institutions.

I deal with the evolving ideologies and events leading up to this situation in Chapter 3, which offers an historical overview of the division between art as craft and art as an academic discipline. It is an interesting debate, but one that those of a nervous or non–academic disposition can safely skip over.

Those who prefer first–person accounts of historical events will find the final part of the book rewarding. Part 3, "The Author, the ICA and After", describes the author's own experiences as a student during this most unsettling of times — for him, at least. Others fared better, but all were part of something impossible to comprehend during the four short years that they were enmeshed in the Fine Art Department of Leeds Polytechnic. The value of an historical perspective is that what was too fast moving to see at the time has slowed down enough to be examined and assessed. The concluding chapter of the book attempts just this task.

In writing this history, I hope to contribute to a reappraisal of what was achieved at Leeds. From our present perspective, it is possible to see that much of the work done there prefigures the art and preoccupations of a later generation of art students

whose efforts were rewarded with acclaim and notoriety. That no such development occurred at Leeds may be due to any number of factors, one of which must be that there was no infrastructure yet in place to support the radical interventions of the Fine Art Department. The galleries, the collectors and the understanding had not yet arrived. What did arrive with the 1970s was a far less hospitable climate for excess and experimentation. One consequence of this was that the achievements of Leeds went uncelebrated and unrecorded. The following account is intended to remedy this state of affairs. I believe there is much to celebrate and much to learn from the era encompassed in this study.