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SAVING THE (ART) WORLD WITH OUR OWN TIME

Edward Hanfling

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Edward Hanfling

There is cause to feel depressed about the future of the arts and humanities in the New Zealand tertiary education sector. The past year has seen a succession of announcements about closing departments and cutting staff across universities. What is in store for those art schools that find themselves belonging to the vocational model of the new "skills-based institute," tasked with meeting "the expectations of employers."[1]

Political attacks on the liberal arts are not new, either in Aotearoa New Zealand or internationally. Falling enrolments, staffing reviews, the axing of "frivolous" courses – these have been happening in New Zealand and internationally for decades. The popular refrain is that these disciplines (and their adherents) offer nothing to the economy, and that refrain grows increasingly strident in the midst of rising student fees and debt, and a gaping divide between the "productive" rich and the "useless" financially challenged.

Twenty years ago, I resigned from my position as lecturer in art history at the Quay School of the Arts, Whanganui Polytechnic. The Quay School was amongst the country's top art schools. Don Binney, long-time lecturer at Auckland's Elam School of Fine Art, extolled its virtues. It had a four-year Bachelor of Fine Arts. The quality, variety and originality of the student work was exceptional, especially in sculpture, where it seemed absolutely anything was possible and there was no "house style;" Mark Baskett has written evocatively of his time there in a previous issue of this journal.[2] But in 2001, Whanganui Polytechnic was subsumed into a larger entity with the ambitious name of the Universal College of Learning (UCOL). UCOL was initially just Palmerston North's local Polytechnic, but it was given the power, by the Labour government of the time, to take over other polytechnics in the lower North Island. Quay School became a shadow of its former self.

How do we argue the value of an art school? The temptation is to say that the politicians and the public have got it wrong: studying and making art *is* useful, if one focuses not on the art itself, but on the enhanced "soft skills" of graduates – communication, problem-solving and critical thinking. An arts degree constitutes "vocational education," because it fosters skills applicable to all manner of jobs.

This argument has merit, but it is also futile at best and self-defeating at worst. For one thing, the people it is aimed at do not care. If there is money to be saved, complex explanations about soft skills will not change the simple solution. For another thing, it is impossible to demonstrate that a graduate gained those invisible attributes from their programme of study. And the main problem is that to defend the arts on the basis of their economic usefulness is to play someone else's game, not ours. People go to art school to make art, not to cultivate cognitive faculties conducive to working for the city council or some corporation or other. They are unlikely to be encouraged by the idea that their studies are preparing them to be a useful pawn in the capitalist system.

As the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) bandwagon rolls on, dominating educational priorities and curricula development, there is a risk that defenders of the liberal arts will get swept up in the ideology in preference to being swept away altogether. Andrew Paul Wood, rehearsing the usual phrases about "soft skills," "critical thinking" and "problem-solving," has concluded that "we clearly need to move beyond the usual defence of the humanities as a common good in of [sic] itself."[3]

Again, I demur. It is not necessary to regress into an art for art's sake fantasy world to insist that art has more value than helping STEM become STEAM. Such a multidisciplinary melange will only ever tolerate the added-on arts because they might enhance the "communication" of the STEM message, which, historically, has lined up neatly with an anthropocentric, progress-obsessed, climate-changing, Western materialist world view. STEM is the dominant ideology. STEAM means artists paying for a place at the table by compromising their alternative visions. Making art is not a retreat from reality, but it is generally a relatively benign activity compared to all the terrible ways of causing harm built into ostensibly useful or productive professions. Dunedin painter Saskia Leek has talked about her art as a way of living that does not involve being "driven to production." These "meandering, untied-down, inconsequential ways of doing," she believes, are nonetheless "important" and "political."[4]

In the United States, in 2008, English and Law theorist and academic Stanley Fish published a book, *Save the World on Your Own Time,* which responded to widespread cuts in state funding of university education.

> The person who asks you to justify what you do is not saying 'tell me why you value the activity,' but 'convince me that I should,' and if you respond in the spirit of that request, you will have exchanged your values for those of your inquisitor. It may seem paradoxical to say so, but any justification of the academy is always a denigration of it.[5]
>
> Stanley Fish

Fish advocates for academics to be brazenly antagonistic rather than "weak-kneed" and conciliatory.[6] "We do what we do, we've been doing it for a long time, and until you learn it or join it, your opinions are not worth listening to."[7] Whether this works any better than the 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em' strategy, I do not know, but I would sooner be unapologetic about the value of art than make it hostage to economic imperatives. Disciplines such as painting and art history are demonstrably sustained by their long, rich and diverse histories. That a large percentage of the nation's populace do not believe they are worthwhile does not mean such disciplines should be extinguished or eradicated (either by external forces or by people within the disciplines toadying to those who hold the power). The romantic alienated artist, pouring their heart out to an unfeeling world, seems like a relic of the past, but perhaps there is something to be said for retaining Rudolf Wittkower's 1961 description of the artist as "queer fish," if it denotes an unwillingness to be co-opted by corporate rhetoric and majoritarian politics.[8]

This issue of *Scope: Art & Design* is dedicated to art, not by design, but because all the contributors happen to have been students, lecturers or residents at the Dunedin School of Art. It begins and ends with essays on abstract painting, historically associated with the "purity" of aesthetic experience, but here conveying the interrelatedness of art and life. Emily Crossen's "Thinking in Colour" is exemplary of the distinctive nature of art making as research, where an immense amount of knowledge of histories and theories of colour is relegated to a series of fascinating footnotes, giving space to evocative reflections on experiences of colour in the everyday environment and in the studio. Linda Cook's "Incandescent Molecules" reveals the intricate process of making "sandwiches" out of paint, cardboard and an ingenious concoction of "pliable goop." These painted objects are, as Cook relates, made out of utilitarian materials, yet stubbornly resistant to use or rationalisation.

Between these essays on abstraction lie further riches that will elude any bean counter or bureaucrat. Rachel Allan and Vincent Chevillon compile unfolding chains of unexpected connections, between lived experience, archival research and storytelling. These are laments, ultimately, about the unfeelingness of human beings in their dealings with non-human beings and things. Raquel Salvatella de Prada mulls over the achievements and limitations of a COVID-era interdisciplinary collaboration between Duke University staff and students, grappling with the crisis of rising sea levels. Essays by Bridie Lonie (on the art of Anita DeSoto) and Lissie Brown (on her MFA project) assert the vitality of painting and sculpture respectively as mediums for challenging the marginalisation of women and of corporeal experience. There are further fascinating reflections on collaborative and individual projects, and art and science crossovers. The immediate political efficacy or application of this research is moot. It all surely, simply,

represents ways of spending time in the world, continually enacting ethical ways of making and living. I pay tribute, here, to all those "queer fish" in the arts and humanities, in and out of paid employment, who have enriched our world with non-instrumental knowledge, and I trust that even if that world is depressingly consumed by destructive agendas, *Scope* 24 is an uplifting reminder of what art does when it is not being used for something else.

1 Te Pūkenga, "Introducing Te Pūkenga," 29 September 2020, https://www.xn--tepkenga-szb.ac.nz/news/introducing-te-pukenga/ (accessed 14 August 2023).

2 See Mark Baskett, "On the Echinate Question of What Might be Meant by the Term 'Research' When Evaluating and Discussing Visual Art," *Scope: Art & Design* 22 (September 2023): 145-146.

3 Andrew Paul Wood, "'We Cannot Afford to Neglect Them': STEM the Tide, Save the Humanities," *The Big Idea,* 26 August 2021, https://thebigidea.nz/stories/we-cannot-afford-to-neglect-them-stem-the-tide-save-the-humanities, (accessed 11 August 2023).

4 Saskia Leek, in conversation with Edward Hanfling, "Decoy Subjects: A Conversation with Saskia Leek," *Art New Zealand* 168 (Summer 2018-19): 52.

5 Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time: Higher Education Under Attack* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 154.

6 Ibid, 161.

7 Ibid, 165-166.

8 Rudolf Wittkower, "Individualism in Art and Artists: A Renaissance Problem," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22, no. 3, July-September 1961: 292.