



## The Art School Project

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## The Art School Project

In the 1960s there were over 150 art schools in England alone and the idea of ‘art school’ was commonplace enough for the term to signify not just a place of study but an almost subcultural set of attitudes and practices. Most of the art schools, many of which were built to meet the needs of industry in the nineteenth century but which became, through various economic and sociological transformations, increasingly out of step with educational policy, have been amalgamated into larger institutions, their buildings repurposed, abandoned, and in some cases, demolished.

Since 2018 we have shown, in a series of regionally-focused exhibitions, original photographs of art school buildings or the sites upon which they stood. A capsule history of each institution accompanies each photograph and we usually include vitrine displays of archival ephemera and other relevant materials. We have explored the art schools of the North West in shows in Liverpool, Bury and Rochdale, and the Midlands in Walsall, Nottingham, Loughborough (Figure 1) and Leicester.<sup>1</sup> We are currently preparing material on Yorkshire for a show in Leeds. The aim is to complete a photographic survey of the over two hundred sites of all UK art schools.

Seeking out the sites of art schools is partly a simple act of retrieval – unlike more famous schools or universities, there is no readily available coherent and consistent account that tells the story of all the British art schools, how they were used and what happened to them. Aside from this cataloguing process, the information gathering and site photography has become a multifaceted form of investigation into a number of related areas, all of which are linked by the presence of the art school building – or its absence.

Part of the process of locating and photographing the art school buildings involves an exploration of the towns and cities in which they are situated, many of which we have not visited before. This ‘field work’ element of the project has demanded an engagement not only with the historical details of a site but also with current circumstances that often speak directly to broader contemporary social and political concerns. Sometimes the old buildings are repurposed as gentrified residential units. More often, they are in under-resourced and commercially abandoned town and city centres, part of the sold off or closed down civic infrastructure of places that once thought having a local art school was a good idea and good business.

We think of the work we do together as an ‘art and research’ project. It is not academic research that uses visual material to illustrate or

Figure 1. John Beck and Matthew Cornford, *The Art Schools of the Midlands*, Martin Hall Gallery, Loughborough University, 16 May–28 June 2024. Installation view. Photograph: Simon Kemp.



accompany scholarly outputs. Nor is it an art project seeking legitimacy or support via some academic scaffolding. The project is, at once, an art project and a research project, the disciplinary demands of art practice and scholarly research in permanent negotiation with one another, each modified, coloured or refracted by the other, and responsive to context-specific limitations and possibilities. While the spine of the each exhibition is a series of photographs of buildings, each iteration has required a reimagining of display options according to spatial, contextual and operational constraints and the peculiarities of local collections – the Rochdale exhibition, for example, included architectural salvage from a long demolished art school. An openness to the unpredictable, the unknown and the inscrutable provides space for a playfulness in the project that works as an effective counterpoint to the relatively deadpan collection of captioned photographs.

The tension between the different practices, methods and traditions drawn upon to do the work is a necessary part of the process and, for the most part, we welcome the confusion of categories that comes with producing words and images that are, at the same time, the result of objective processes of information gathering and representation and also carefully crafted, self-aware and deliberately self-effacing artistic statements. The point is that we come to this work not as art historians or sociologists but as people who know about pictures and words and how they might work together. The project benefits from, and continues to learn from, among other disciplines, art and architectural history, social, economic and educational history, local history and heritage studies, urban planning and cultural geography. The work moves through and across these fields of study but the Art School Project, while it is built

from the most accurate data we can gather, does not completely belong in any of these disciplinary silos and does not feel beholden to them.

In many ways the project dramatizes the complicated interactions between the visual and the verbal, the photograph and the caption, the artist and the academic—one showing and the other who cannot resist telling. We did not set out to make it so, but this dialogue, or argument, also indirectly alludes to the drama of art education in the UK since 1960, when the Ministry of Education published its First Report of the National Advisory Council on Art Education, commonly known as the Coldstream Report, after its chair, the painter Sir William Coldstream. The Report called for art courses to include some academic content as part of their transformation from vocational and craft-based training into something resembling ‘proper’ higher education. In a way, the incremental movement of art education inside the higher educational mainstream, from the introduction of the Bachelor’s degree in the early 1970s through modularization to the practice-based PhD, has always, very loosely, been about an argument between conventionally antagonistic modes of enquiry, that is, art and scholarship (or practice and theory, doing and thinking, and so on).

A similar antagonism, of course, has also been played out over the years inside institutions of art education, so often internally divided between ‘fine’ and ‘applied’ arts. The endless name changes many British art schools underwent over the course of their lifetimes suggests an irresolvable rift between art and industry periodically rehearsed in tweaked nomenclature, as art and technical schools became schools of ‘arts and crafts’, then rebranded as colleges of ‘art and design’.<sup>2</sup> That there is a class dimension to this division should come as no surprise, yet the majority of British art schools were not set up to elevate the masses but to train workers and until the Coldstream reforms the majority of art schools operated squarely in the unglamorous further education sector.

The history of British art schools is a not insignificant aspect of the history of British visual culture. Most obviously, art schools for many years provided the workforce, the ideas, the products and the demand that shaped British visual culture through design and manufacturing, advertising and marketing, and in fields from fashion and textiles, furniture and product design, to print media, popular music, TV and film production. Partly because we are not art historians, from the outset we were not that interested in art schools as the incubators of successful artists (though of course they were and continue to be), nor were we motivated to tell the stories of influential and prominent art schools (though these are also important).<sup>3</sup> We wanted to piece together the national picture, to think about those art schools in unlikely places, that served unexpected constituencies, and that contributed to the cultural and economic lives of communities in ways not necessarily covered by conventional disciplinary preoccupations. As a consequence, the Art School Project thus far has had little to say about art and artists as such, though we are learning a good deal about what British society since the middle of the nineteenth century thought art might be, who got to make

## 4 THE ART SCHOOL PROJECT

it, why and for whom. We are learning about how towns shape institutions, how institutions produce and support communities, and how legacies are built and forgotten.<sup>4</sup> What we learn, most importantly, is fed through our collective artistic and literary mincing machine and made into work that is not just about visual culture, engaged in exploring the forms, spaces, processes, and politics of visual meaning-making, but is also, inevitably, a form of British visual culture itself.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *The Art Schools of North West England*, Bluecoat, Liverpool 17 November 2018–31 March 2019; *The North West Art School Record Machine*, Bury Art Gallery and Sculpture Centre, 12 October 2019–25 January 2020; *Harmony, Contrast & Discord: Rochdale and the Art Schools of the North West*, Touchstones Rochdale, 18 May–3 July 2021; *The Art Schools of the West Midlands*, The New Art Gallery Walsall, 17 February–2 July 2023; *The Art Schools of the East Midlands*, Bonington Gallery, Nottingham Trent University, 22 September–2 December 2023; *The Art Schools of the Midlands*, Martin Hall Gallery, Loughborough University, 16 May–28 June 2024. The exhibition at the Leicester Gallery, De Montfort University, opens in April 2025.
- <sup>2</sup> Those schools that survived waves of reorganization between the 1960s and the 1990s to become departments in new polytechnics and universities lost, in many cases, a sense of their own distinctive histories and became invisible as schools of art in their own right. In recent times, however, as institutions have sought to distinguish themselves within a crowded educational marketplace, a number of universities have rediscovered their own heritage and in some cases returned to calling their art departments the ‘school of art.’
- <sup>3</sup> The Tate’s valuable Leverhulme-funded project ‘Art School Educated’ (2009–2014) focused on ‘Curriculum Development and Institutional Change in UK Art Schools 1960–2000’, with particular reference to major London art schools. The project team subsequently published *The London Art Schools: Reforming the Art World, 1960 to Now* (London: Tate, 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, architectural historian Geoffrey Tyack’s comment that ‘[t]he provincial art schools of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain played an important, if largely forgotten, part in the civic culture of the time, enlivening what were sometimes mundane urban environments and dignifying the lives of their students, who came with divergent aims and from differing social backgrounds.’ Tyack, ‘The Architecture of Art Education’, 73.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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