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THE FUTURE OF ARTS EDUCATION

Greg Snider of Simon Fraser University's Centre for the Arts contends that government, business and educational managers are forming an alliance to serve the needs of the business community and the job market. A major result of this alliance will be the relegation of the arts to a decorative role in society. Educators and artists must unite to resist this economic rationalism and to maintain the arts' vital role as an examiner of society.

We are all aware at this point of the concerted efforts to fundamentally change the course of education in this province, through the precipitation of an economic crisis which serves as the impetus for the rationalization of educational priorities. Generally, this is perceived to be a short-sighted provincial problem, which can be countered on the grounds of its inherent irrationality. However, this is not so, and will not stop it from happening. What may be less obvious is the second part of this rearrangement of the social agenda, which is the vested interest of the national business community in the success of this attempt. There is presently a concerted lobby at the federal level, as outlined in recent articles and editorials in the *Financial Post*. calling for the complete reorganization of the country's educational systems to bring them directly into the service of the business community and the job market. This is reinforced by the popular perception of an education as a guarantee of a good job. Universities, rather than trying to clarify this misperception and re-confirm their role in the development of autonomous thinking and action, have instead embraced this new coalition as the financial saviour of higher education, regardless of the strings attached. Within this acceptance is an overall perception of the university as now serving *one* social function, supplying a job market, at the expense of those disciplines, including art, which were long ago disabused of such notions. The rise of a managerial administration, coupled with the introduction of vice presidents of research and development, has begun within universities the modification of education which mimics the model of business, and operates as an extension of it.

Governments which have supported higher education through their period of greatest growth have now begun to withdraw that support, leaving the universities in a financial bind requiring new economic ties, and business has come forward in this moment of need with their declaration of support. This support is linked to the business community's realization of the need for university brainpower to assure their industrial survival and international competitiveness, to provide it with the ideas and expertise necessary to remain competitive in world markets. To this end, business, government and education appear ready to unite in a planned program.



The rationalization of education insists, as part of its platform, that all available programs form part of a larger interlocking whole, not only within the hierarchy of primary, secondary and post-secondary education within a province, but finally within a national scheme that standardizes and conforms education to a goal-oriented model of corporate and industrial accommodation in the name of efficiency. There is no room in the scheme for problematic disciplines of dubious value and questionable economics. But the questionable nature of art is exactly the reason many of us are in it; an unquestioned practice would hold no further interest for us. Thus with culture as a whole: we do not do art because we feel it is good for society, whether that society wants it or not, but rather because it puts that society into perspective and allows us a place to work out our relation to it, and to offer that society some reflection on itself.

This notion of the accommodation of dissent, within the liberal era, was axiomatic as that dissent suggested the strength of the model. But we are no longer in the liberal era, which has been in obvious decline since the 60's, and now we are faced with a reaction that is being legislated from above. BC still represents the most extreme form of that reaction in North America, and now the Conservative government in Ottawa has begun its own program of reduction and rationalization.

While this rationalization has its own agenda of ersatz reasonableness, it is also simultaneously able within an overall reduction to rearrange long-standing social institutions. Figuring significantly within that rearrangement is education, and the recent call by John Wilson, Chairman of the consulting firm Woods, Gordon, at a recent meeting of the Ontario Economic Council, for the formation of a "rationalization authority" of business aligned with government aligned with education can only spell the end for those disciplines that fail to demonstrate a functional relationship to the new economic order. To relinquish the right of self-examination in the name of economic rationalism is committing the future of education to an unthinking, uncritical, unenlightened position of passivity from which it will be unable to prevent its own absorption and dissolution.

The most distressing fact of the university's current reconstitution wholly within an economic model is the removal of an emphasis on the role of teaching itself. The idea of some part of the university conforming to this economic model- if that is in fact what is necessary for the university's survival - while allowing other parts of the university their traditional autonomy, is a concept that seems not to have occurred to the present technocratic managerial class of university administrators, in the rush to rearrange the university. These are not mutually exclusive concepts: certainly a part of the university that can attract external support can then support that part of the university which cannot support itself.



The accepted principle of universal access to higher education could only be supported as long as society was economically committed to that idea. Now that that era has passed, a new idea is proposed, in the name of progress, but actually reactionary.

A truly disturbing characteristic of all this is the university's own failure to propose a clear distinction between what is job-oriented within its own programs (technical training, in fact) and what conforms to an earlier idea of the university's role in the investigation of knowledge, the evaluation of that knowledge, the clarification of thinking, free inquiry, and a larger social consciousness of what constitutes a worthwhile lived experience. Ideas of academic freedom and arm's length autonomy are giving way to a managed university enterprise at the expense of those concepts, ideas and forms on which universities were founded. The rationalization of priorities excludes the arts automatically, reflexively; those forms of knowledge that constitute and inform art production and its analysis, as an academic discipline, may soon be driven out of the very forum in which they were developed as ways of understanding what culture is and does. An examination of the role of meaning and ideas, their analysis and discussion, has constituted a large part of an attempt to engage the enquiring mind in an examination of its own suppositions and beliefs.

Insofar as art fundamentally contains ideas, and serves as the origin of a discourse regarding its own history and emergence, it is a critical subject. Recent art work suggesting a reduction of artistic practice to the straightforward manipulation of material skills, linked to intuitive and innate understanding of the primacy of emotive relations within art, bears no further criteria than its own internalized self-validation; an art dependent on the logic of its own suppositions. This attempt to free art from its historic context, and propose in its place an *ad hoc* formulation of meaning, seems to parallel the university's and business community's scheme of urgent and expedient change that disregards the original reasons why universities and schools were set up the way they were, and rather than propose new structures for new needs, are overhauling the old in Procrustean fashion.

The SFU Centre for the Arts has had an influence out of all proportion to its small size, limited funding, and brief history. Already its presence is widely felt, but the program is barely off the ground and it may be recalled; this at the first indication of the general success of the program, which was intentionally organized around the principle of the unification of theory and practice in the production of significant contemporary art. An art that signifies, that has meaning, and the investigation and discussion of meaning, as it constitutes knowledge, forms the core of this program. Insofar as meaning is informed by materials and making, it is available to critical examination. Within that critical examination fall questions of reception, of social relevance, of efficacy with respect to audiences; all within



the context of what it means to continue to make art *in* this culture, in this time. A consciousness of social practice informing work, within a changing theory of culture. means that the critical discourse remains open to shifts within the ideological superstructure. The predominant number of women in art programs, and the attendant critical feminist discourse (which is as extreme as any within education or culture, and more urgent than most) has raised issues within predominantly male faculties that has led to the reexamination of engendered material practices and patriarchic theoretics. This has resulted in works of fundamental reclamation. often necessarily derived from exclusive feminist perspectives, as well as works that reconstitute traditional practices to disrupt their expectations. The difficulty of much of this work, and its necessarily unfamiliar nature, has posed problems of reception that must be critically and curatorially resolved. A continuing marginalization, which to some extent has been the strength of the avant-garde, indicates the difficulty of a project not readily accommodated.

There are some. including artists. who welcome the decline of arts support. as a return to the romantic notion of the starving artist in the garret whose production was somehow authenticated by poverty and suffering, but who are in fact behaving exactly in accordance with those calling for ' the reorganization of culture measured by economic efficacy. They are collapsing without resistance.

This is no time for artists. who are among the primary producers of culture, to begin acting on behalf of those who would welcome the voluntary and internal dismantling of this cultural structure. It will save them the job of *forcing* us to do it. Much of what we have taken for granted may soon no longer be available to us. Cutbacks in the Canada Council and other high-profile rearrangements of the social agenda. deflect attention from the underlying reorganization that has caused this repriorization. The preservation of those programs which have *never* been able to defend themselves economically, but which have been the source of much cultural and critical production and discourse, can reaffirm the ideals of education.

The role of any art program is to clarify for the artists within it what they are doing and why, so that their intentionality is not misconstrued. The arts have a fundamental stake in this encouragement, and their continued survival is not a question of self-interest, but of the importance of their ability to bring artists to full consciousness of the meaning and *[i]* consequence of their acts and their ideas. For culture itself, this means a critical presence that can freely examine the suppositions and premises on which that culture is based. The managed future has no room for such independence and autonomy. Without resistance, the arts may truly become decorative within this reconstituted educational system.