Barby Asante, *All Noise Summit* (2014);
Pelican Estate, Peckham
Commissioned by South London Gallery
southlondongallery.org/page/barby-asante

Look At The (E)state We're In is a two day event exploring the phenomena of art on social housing estates, led by Patricia Ellis and Jordan McKenzie and produced by students (including Damaris Dresser and Aveen Lennon) from University of the Arts London in partnership with Peckham Platform. It will include discussion panels, exhibitions, live art projects and workshops. Here, two of the participating artists – Barby Asante and Laura Oldfield Ford join McKenzie and Dresser to discuss art-power v. gentrification and why 'the revolution' will most definitely not be aspirational.

Images
Top left: Laura Oldfield Ford, *Heygate Estate 1974-2014* (2011)
Bottom left: © Nicholas McArthur LUPA 2013
Right: © Laura Oldfield Ford

Damaris Dresser —You all have different approaches to making art in relation to social housing – can you each tell us about what you do?

Barby Asante —I'm interested in play, regeneration, and young people having a voice within their spaces. I organised a project called *Noise Summit* with South London Gallery and Pelican estate in Peckham in 2014. My ideas for *Noise Summit* were related to the 2011 riots – how do you capture the voices of young people when they want to dissent from their 'assigned' places? A precursor to that is a work I did on Barnfield estate in Plumstead, BF18, where young people from the estate and I made a sci-fi film about their estate being an island invaded by aliens.

In my practice I'm interested in people actually affecting something. And maybe it's really big for an artist to say they want to effect some kind of change, even if it's a change in perspective about how you see your place.

Laura Oldfield Ford —My works offer a strident critique of gentrification and social cleansing. Especially over the last decade in the South East, we've seen an acceleration of working class areas being closed down. People are being pushed out of zone 1 and 2 to the periphery. The right to buy scheme has been a critical moment in that process and subsequent governments haven't gone on to build any more council houses. Plus we've got this crisis now where new buildings are going up at an increasingly accelerated rate but they're being sold off shore, not even for buy to let, but buy to invest.

There are recent examples like the New Era estate in Shoreditch where people have organised themselves to resist a hostile takeover from a US company that was going to triple their rent. There's been the E15 mothers' campaign in Stratford, which is equally inspiring – people organising themselves to reject this process of class cleansing. What we're talking about is 'decanting': with the housing benefit cap, people are being told, "if you can't afford market rent here, there's always Bradford or Hull."

My work as an artist and writer is as someone that walks around London chronicling these urban spaces, precipitating some action against that process, or offering a resistance to it. I'm making reference to my own experience of living on the Aylesbury estate, while at the same time, trying to discuss the wider sociopolitical implications.

Jordan McKenzie —I live on the Approach estate and I find it really problematic when artists move into spaces and they assume there's no community there. There is community, and there's already culture there. But at the same time I'm interested in seeing what more could happen. So from a garage I rented, I opened up a performance space called LUPA (Lock Up Performance Art) and we staged various performances once a month and also sent a newsletter out. It's a co-existence, rather than an intervention. The estate residents got really into it and really enjoyed it. The reason I think I can do that is because I live there. I'm always worrying about artists helicoptering in and doing stuff and then going again. So for me, it's just like – well I live there too – so when you talk about community, that includes (fortunately or unfortunately), artists.

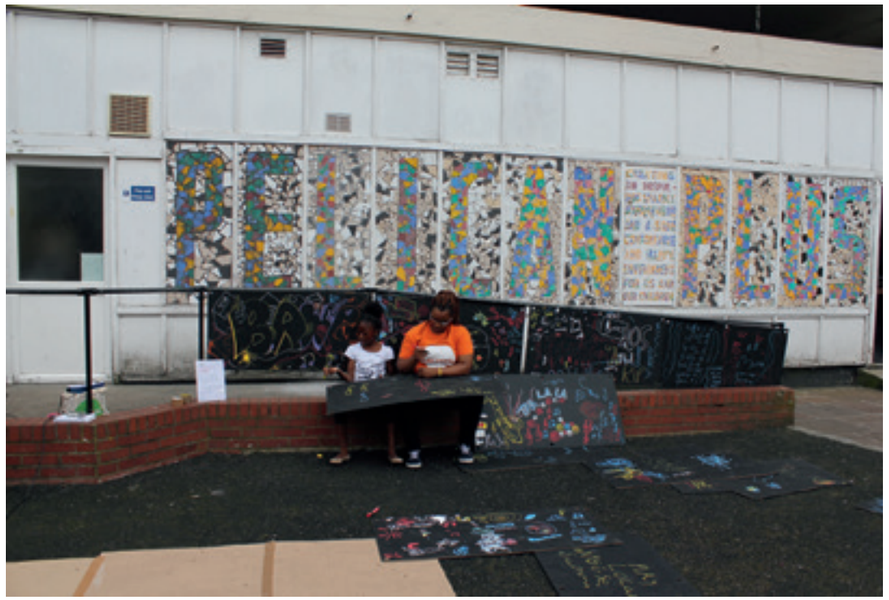
LOF — This idea of community is really problematic. I'm thinking of the 2011 uprisings and the way that that almost became a clarifying process and it really exposed the attitudes of what I would call 'middle-class colonisers' to areas in London like Hackney and Clapham Junction. The word 'community' was evoked after that. We had these dehumanising words banded about like 'rats', 'hoodies', 'chavs', and we had this evocation of this idea of community as exemplified by the 'broom brigade' – the most horrific image of the whole thing. They were saying, "This is community." They're not. Essentially, through that statement, they've just discarded, disowned and dehumanised a whole section of society, of people who have actually been there longer than them.

BA — When I was on the estate, thinking around the idea of playing, this middle-class thing of 'we'll have our houses and gardens' actually restricted playing. The children I was working with had an incredible imagination, except they were told that they didn't because they had this experience which was supposedly more 'weird' and 'animalistic' than being brought up with the 'broom brigade'. Cleaning up the community, bringing in the farmers markets, etc., it's really this idea of 'civilising'. Obviously, there are racial tensions. Most of the children that came to play were Vietnamese, African, Caribbean. Not many of the white parents were around encouraging their kids to come and play, but some came.

DD — Laura, where do you think the ideology behind estates failed?

LOF — When '60s/'70s estates were designed, they were born out of the post-war idea of collectivity, a future that was based on mutual co-operation, but they were doomed to live out their years in the rapacious individualism of the Thatcherites. It was a deliberate policy to starve some estates from investment. If you compare the experience of living on the Heygate in Elephant & Castle to living in the Barbican, for example: both were built around the same time and share a brutalist architecture style, but the experiences are polar opposite. And that's all down to money.

Having your own council house was something to be proud of, but since the '80s it's become a source of



Right: LUPA (Lock Up Performance Art)
2011-2013
Co-curated by Rachel Dowle, Kate Mahony, Jordan McKenzie and Aaron Williamson

Images L-R:

Laura Oldfield Ford, *TQ3382: Tweed House, Teviot Street* (2012)

Barby Asante, *All Noise Summit* (2014) (as before)

shame and embarrassment. You've got to own your own house to become a proper grownup member of society.

JM — I've always been interested in non-official economies... and antagonism. I have a character that I perform on the estate called Mr Poo-Pourri. He's this aristocrat who's hit on hard times and lives in a council flat and misrecognises the estate he's on for a country estate. So I go around on a hobby horse dressed in full riding gear, regarding my estate – to test how difference in class is negotiated, whether I become absorbed into that or whether I'm alienated from that, and what happens. I'm not working class so I am interested in, if you come from a different position, what happens when you try and negotiate that?

BA — Estates are space for negotiation of different identities. There are these different dialogues about life, aspiration... there are more realistic conversations on estates than in what is now called "Brixton Village".

LOF — It's always "a village"! (laughs)

BA — That language is really problematic. There's Stockwell Park estate – now it has been 'tidied up' and called 'The Junction'. They take all of the language and idea around estates away, sanitise it and make it more appealing to these people who can't afford to live in the Edwardian house.

JM — In my estate it's always the hardliners who want the gated communities. The 'village-ification' of these places – where it's always got to be window boxes and farmer's markets – it's this idea that urban is bad.

LOF — The reason that the language is particularly damaging, is because it puts the emphasis on the individual. This goes hand-in-hand with the endless prescriptions for anti-depressants and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, where it's the individual that needs to be fixed. If you're living in poverty, if you're struggling, it's down to you. The inequality in this country has massively intensified in the last few years and that's totally dispensed with. We've got this running elite, this clique from Eton, who've inherited all this wealth, and they've got the cheek to say to us that we shouldn't expect something for nothing!

BA — The country needed this incredible workforce [the working class] and these people were/are the people that are building these spaces. That's wiped out of memory in that very 'aspirational' language, that that kind of community isn't important. It goes back to now, where we've got a migrant or immigrant communities coming in and doing this work and are also being demeaned. 'Aspiration' is part of that migrant story – you can't continue to hear the demeaning and you do not want your children to continue to hear that kind of narrative. My family came here and did shitty jobs and got called shitty names and were demeaned on a daily basis. There's part of that individualism that is really problematic and there's part of it that's just like – it's a constant thing on you – and then you get a situation like in 2011 where people are uprising. And 1981 and 1985. And it's going to happen again as there's this constant demeaning of people.

JM — Language is money and class based, and education has quite a bit to do with that as well. There seems to be an awful lot of social engagement going on in Peckham from Camberwell College but there isn't much going on in Chelsea, which are both part of the University of the Arts London.

LOF — The access to higher education is being barred to people who are growing up in these places. It's really galling for people to see these privileged people coming in and making art 'for them', to engage them, when they have no chance of doing it themselves.

BA — I was working up in Havering and the woman that was assisting me, she said something like, "This is really good. I'd really like to do more of this work in areas like Weybridge," and I was like, "Why don't you do it in Weybridge?" She was like, "Weybridge doesn't need it." I think Weybridge probably needs it a lot more, as on the reverse, these are the people that get into these jobs and perpetuate a narrative around people they don't know anything about. These are people that are moving into spaces like Hackney and Brixton and deciding that it's like this, when in fact it might actually be quite different. So I think it's a really interesting thing that the focus is always concentrated on 'giving something' to the 'disadvantaged'. Arts commissioning is interesting in that there's always this idea of promoting wellbeing and being good to people on estates. The historical narrative of some galleries is philanthropic – enlightening the community, giving something to the poor that will make them 'better'…

JM — It's also how funding structures have been co-opted by neoliberalism. Galleries have their 'communities'. They almost carve out 'this is my working class community!' which can be used for funding bids. There's a lot of territorialism....

BA — That's written into funding criteria and there is a sort of success about that, another kind of aspirational thing. To me, it's very missionary. I recently did some work around a film of James Baldwin's visit to London in 1968 and he was asked about white liberals, and he broke down the idea of a why a white liberal can't join the black power movement. He basically said that if it's

always about this idea of 'I'm going to help you', you're not going to get anywhere, so we don't want you in the movement. If something is happening to me, it's also happening to you. This idea that it's always this top down 'I am giving to you' is a really problematic thing. That's why I think this idea of talking about it as art on estates – kind of almost negates that these places exist within a wider community, and we don't need to separate that out.

DD — Do you think that what estates have come to symbolise – crime, poverty, the welfare state – is synonymous with what they are in reality?

BA — It's rubbish. Everybody that I've ever worked with was working and the only people that weren't were people that needed not to.

LOF — In the '80s there was a deliberate Tory policy to run down those estates, and the media played a huge part in that. The way that those estates were maligned was vicious. This kind of demonisation of the working class. People used to be proud to be working class, it was good. We had the best sense of humour and the best places to go out and now it's regarded as something to be ashamed of. There's all these really vicious programmes on TV like 'Benefits Street'.

JM — Perpetuated also by filmmakers and sometimes artists as well. It's good drama isn't it? You know drugs, and all that, and hardship.

BA — But it's also the way in which these narratives have been accepted, because it's not like you can't write good stories… but if we look at the way television is going, the reality TV thing – if you think about the 1980s when Channel 4 came in, programmes were really informative and political, that sort of programming does not exist at all now. There was recently a Stuart Hall memorial conference at Goldsmiths and I was thinking of all these people that were involved in Marxism Today, the new left and feminist campaigns. All these people that were creating this culture have almost been wiped out. This weird classist ethnography that looks at Gypsy communities or benefit communities or chicken shops like they're some sort of weird entity that has entered the UK. And we still have this narrative around British values and apparently these aren't included.

LOF — What we've lost is that access to mainstream media. I think the problem with a lot of people on the left, or anarchists, or artists, is that we've almost allowed ourselves to settle in these little niche positions on the fringes of things. And we've accepted that and allowed the right to set in and take that centre ground and we've got to take that back.

More info and event bookings at Latewi.co.uk
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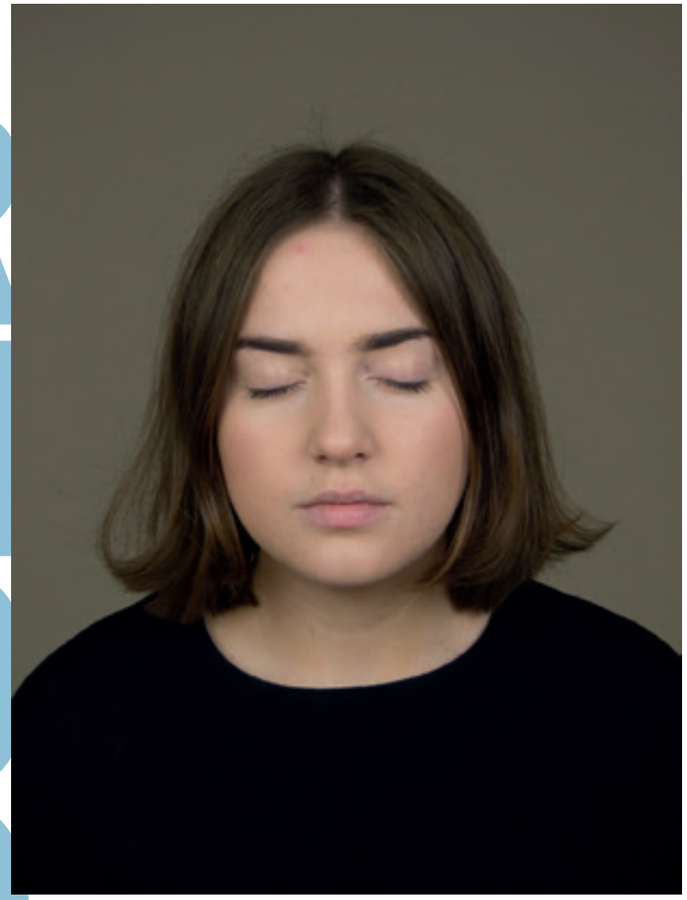
Image, below © Ole Hagan LUPA 2012

DON'T LET OUR YOUTH GO TO WASTE

Jamie Holman admits that his life was as good as saved by going to art school. Nowadays a tutor at Blackburn College, a rare beacon of creative inspiration and aspiration in an otherwise depressed part of northwest England currently feeling the impact of coalition government austerity measures, Holman is deeply troubled by the uncertain future of arts education for those not fortunate enough to have independent funding. Here, he reflects on his own experience and asks some key players in the cultural learning debate about the prospects for art in the classroom and its effect on small town communities.



Eyes wide open, eyes wide shut, 2015
All photographs courtesy Sophie Hambling

By the time I was 18 I had lived on my own, in one form or another, for two years. No sob story, no drama and not uncommon in Blackburn, where I'm from. I shared rented houses with friends and had a stint in a council flat on the top floor of a high-rise block. There was a rented room in a family home for a week and friends' sofas and girlfriends' parents' places in between.

Every other Monday I went to the post office and had my income support book stamped in exchange for money to live on. I was young, having fun and didn't really have the capacity to contemplate the future in any terms beyond the next Monday payment. I didn't know anyone who had been to university. My dad had been a soldier and my mum had been, well, my mum. I left school as an Easter leaver under a cloud, without GCSEs or ambition, and just slipped through the net. I watched daytime television and listened to records. It was brilliant for two whole summers. I sat around daydreaming, writing terrible poetry, chucking gloss paint about like Jackson Pollock, or (as I thought at the time) like John Squire, while listening to the baggy rumblings coming out of Manchester. It was fucking brilliant, for a while, or at least until a few teenage fuck-ups collided in a matter of weeks. The landlord of my house chucked me out because the rent wasn't paid, and a minor run-in with the police led to the realisation that if I got in any worse trouble I would be going to prison.

With no actual grown-ups around to ask, I did what anyone aged 18 in Levi's and Doc Martens would. I asked Morrissey for advice and he said "Panic!" So panic I did, especially when the dole suddenly set me up with an interview for the only job I was actually qualified for. When I got the job, in a very well known burger chain, I literally cried in the toilet in despair. I certainly wasn't *lovin' it*. The uniform was shit and every girl I wanted to sleep with was a vegetarian. Faced with a lifetime of chips and grease, I decided to go to college instead.

I signed up for one year of GCSEs which led to a place on, followed by almost immediate expulsion from, Foundation Art and Design, and then a glorious year on a new Media Foundation at Blackburn College where I made videos and learned about Joseph Beuys, poetic documentary, scratch film and Bill Viola. For the first time in years I started getting up before eight, to be at college before nine. I went every day and stayed late, joining clubs and watching films.

Blackburn College had responded with a sense of community responsibility and accepted me into its care. It became my parent, my peers, my extended family. I was nurtured, encouraged and cared for by the tutors I met. I was engaged, stimulated and excited by what I was learning. The mantra at the time was life-long learning and every tutor I met was committed to helping me 'get out'. And I did get out; I escaped the terminal dole, the shitty jobs, the high-rise flats and the slow death that could have been my future.

As far as costs went, I was encouraged by the Job Centre to stay in education. Because I studied part time (the same hours that are now classed as full time, incidentally) I received housing benefit and income support as long as I looked for work and went to reviews every few months. The benefits review panel perceived a college course as training that could lead towards a job.

Eventually, I signed-off and found myself in London, after being accepted onto the degree course at Chelsea College of Art and Design. I applied, was interviewed and my potential was spotted. There wasn't any talk of fees or where I was from, they just looked at the work I presented, asked difficult questions and then said yes.

I arrived in London during the last gasp of the turgid Tory government of John Major, but just in time for YBAs, the initial promise of the Blair years, Camden Town and Cool Britannia.

My life changed forever the day I started at Chelsea. I remember it as if the world suddenly changed from black and white into colour. Everything that has happened during the second half of my life is linked to it, from the adventures and friendships that followed, to a job I love, my wife, family and the people I met at the time, some of whom now ask me to write for the magazine you are reading. Sometimes I gasp at how close I came to a different future.

Twenty years later, the level of education you experience is potentially based on what you can afford, or what you are willing to borrow to pay for it. In simple terms, it looks like this: kids are supposed to be in education or training until 18. The courses studied at this age will be free and are intended to lead to higher education, training or employment. Beyond the age of 18, things are a lot tougher.

I wanted to pose the question: if I were twenty years old in 2015, would I have the same freedom, opportunities and time to figure out what I wanted to study that I had back in 1994?

Nick Juba is Director of the University of The Arts London Awarding Body. I spoke to Nick for an hour at The House of St. Barnabas in Soho Square. We sat in a corner of this private club, surrounded by Harland Miller paintings and Gilbert and George editions and talked about what is actually happening in art education now. UAL have consistently worked with the government, providing a voice for students, lecturers and universities from a pre-degree perspective. My personal opinion is that they have two main strengths. The first is that they are based in a university that houses some of the best art schools in the world (including Central St. Martins, Camberwell and my alma mater, Chelsea). Secondly, they are the only awarding body that work solely with art and design qualifications.

I talk to Nick about my concerns over the coalition government's austerity measures and specifically the threat to art education. He is keen to share some statistics and point out that it's not all as grim as I might think.

"Some positives first," he begins. "The creative industries are incredibly successful in terms of their economic impact, contributing £76.9BN per year to the UK economy (5% of the total UK economy). We employ 1.71million people (5.6% of the total jobs in the UK). However, we are not great at communicating the success of our creative industries to government or to parents of young people. Partly this is because it is so complex, but we must move away from the perception that studying at art school is going to lead to you sitting in a loft with a smock and a paintbrush."

So what is the issue with the cuts, I ask him? "Government policy around education for 14-19 year olds and adults lacks sensitivity," he explains, "It assumes that our subjects are taught and assessed in the same way as business or science. This is not the case. Our subjects demand an emphasis on the process as well as the final piece. This means students produce a large body of work, a portfolio, and this must be assessed if we are to properly provide employers and universities with the information they need about the knowledge, skills and understanding of creative art students."

If you are interested in applying for an art degree, you are usually expected to have completed a one-year Foundation in art where you learn everything from life drawing to textiles before choosing one area of art to specialise in. Most kids start foundation wanting to be artists; throughout the year that might turn into fashion designer, product designer or photographer. The point is, it was art that got them there. Although the foundation happens post A-level (so kids who apply would be around the 18 mark) it is still free. It is more precarious, however, if you are aged 19-23, and if you are over 24, there is already a loan in place. I ask Nick about the impact of cuts and the future of foundation as a gateway to art college for all.

Nick tells me, "Foundation Art (FAD) is thriving. Our data shows no reduction in the number of students following

Foundation at a national level. This year, we will certificate around 8,000 students from Falmouth to Carlisle. Funding for Foundation for 16-19 year olds feels reasonably secure as study programmes focus on the package of learning rather than specific qualifications. Universities continue to need Foundation. Without it many students would not be able to make the transition from A-level to undergraduate study in the arts. We would either have to radically overhaul the A-level or think about how some of the diagnostic components of Foundation could be embedded in undergraduate degrees."

I ask Nick, as a leader in an arts-based education, how UAL is positioning itself against those recent structural changes to the skills sector, such as the introduction of National Colleges. Are there any plans for a National College for art and design?

He replies, "UAL is working with one of the new National Colleges at the Backstage Centre in Thurrock and is very supportive of their work to develop higher-level technical skills for back and off-stage professions. However, our commitment to Further Education (FE) is as strong as ever. Of the 90-odd institutions we work with, the vast majority are in FE, along with universities and a handful of sixth-form colleges. This commitment is going nowhere. However, I do fear for the position of FE at present. It is under enormous financial pressures. The decision to ring-fence the 11-16 year olds schools budget by this administration is, on the face of it, a good one. However, the unintended consequence is that funding for 16-18 year olds is reduced. The AoC (Association of Colleges) say that 16-18 year olds receive 22% less funding than their 11-16 year-old colleagues. There will come a point (and we are not far from it already) where it is no longer possible to deliver a high-quality education for this age group with the amount of money available. This is a scandalous position given the importance of the 16-18 phase, particularly for creative arts subjects. At the same time, the adult budget has fallen by an estimated 35% in five years (according to the AoC). The impact of the current funding position is that colleges are getting the squeeze!"

We finish by talking about the issue we started with an hour earlier: the need for widening participation. The statistics may paint one picture, but everyone I speak to is in agreement that these numbers must include opportunities for students from all social backgrounds, regardless of gender, ethnicity, financial deprivation or geography. Through working with partner colleges up and down the country, Nick knows that austerity hurts. He tells me that UAL are about to work with schools, offering training to art teachers who often feel the full force of cuts in the classroom, while the traditional academic subjects receive priority.

UAL is also piloting progression opportunities to university with partner colleges, something I have personal experience of. It's the real deal. It's life changing. It's the reason I'm here speaking to Nick, because I feel that, finally, someone is doing something to help. As I write this, there are around 15 students that I teach in Blackburn (including the artist whose work illustrates this feature) being offered places to study in London as a result of UAL's commitment to nurture and interview students from good art colleges, regardless of geography or social circumstances. It feels like a victory in spite of the challenges of poverty and the fear of debt that hangs over our students' every move. The agreement gets these students in front of the university staff, without the cost of train tickets to London for five different interviews.

The positives Nick describes restore my faith in the days to come, despite the continuing slash and burn policies of the coalition government. As we speak, I lose my thread because Jarvis Cocker has appeared in the doorway. I stare and smile, not because of the icon in the room, but because I know that Jarvis came from working class Sheffield, found his way to Central St. Martins and survived on the dole while flailing away, unsuccessfully, at his craft. This was back before he became an international pop star, cultural commentator and broadcaster (and, if he continues, the dreaded national treasure). I confess my star struck feelings and Nick smiles and tells me that Jarvis is a founder of this club, St. Barnabas. It's a social enterprise that funds a project to train homeless people for work, here in the heart of Soho. It is a genuinely inspiring and worthwhile venture that reminds me that Jarvis has more than repaid his student grants and, as *The Daily Mail* styles them, benefit hand-outs . He couldn't have done it without art school.

Nick offers me access to the club for the remainder of the morning, but I have to reluctantly decline. I need to make my way to a meeting with Sir John Sorrell at his charity foundation offices at Somerset House. The walk gives me an opportunity to reflect on what Nick and I have discussed and to think about the college where I work, and what we are trying to do there. Nick is right: the government reports, the UCAS data and my own experiences tell us that kids are still going to college, and then applying to university, regardless of cuts, fees and the widening gap between rich and poor. But the picture isn t as simple as the data suggests. I know that our college works hard to attract students and to help them progress to university. At times I think it's almost Dickensian, but this is how we do it: the first part of our offer is subsidised travel, which means that students can get to us without distance and finance being a barrier to learning. It's a seven-day, anytime pass. The students can get to exhibitions, get to a part-time job, collaborate after hours and work late in the evenings if they want to. Across the academic year, travel will cost these students roughly one pound per week. I have students who travel for two hours each way to come to our art school. The

second thing we offer is a free breakfast for all students, regardless of status. Toast, porridge, tea and orange juice are free for all students between 8:15 and 8:45am. The queues are long and demand is high. It no longer surprises me. There is a container, in the same refectory, that staff fill with donations for the local food bank. The UCU union reps collect and distribute this food to charities including those open to students. Fifteen years into the 21st century and we are still struggling to feed our own people. Many of these students are not living and learning, they are surviving and learning despite the barriers of not having enough to eat. Read that again. Some of these students are not getting enough to eat.

So do students come to Blackburn College for the free breakfasts? No. Students still come to college for the same reason I did: to get away, to get out. To simply do something, when there is literally nothing else to do.

I have been reading a book that Sir John Sorrell has co-authored with Paul Roberts and Darren Henley: *The Virtuous Circle: Why Creativity and Cultural Education Count*. It articulates much of what I have been thinking during the last few years. In some places it is a call to arms and action in defence of the arts and the potential that engagement with art has to change lives. Despite reading the book with almost missionary zeal, it's tough to prepare for a discussion with a man whose biography reads as follows: *Sir John Sorrell, the son of a north London milkman, knighted in 2008 for services to the creative industries. Born in an air-raid shelter during the Second World War. Both he and his wife Lady Frances Sorrell attended Saturday morning art classes before John eventually studied commercial art full time at Hornsey Art School in the 50s. In 1976, John and Frances launched Newell and Sorrell, one of Europe's biggest and most successful design businesses and ran it for over 20 years. John has chaired the Design Council, the government advisory group, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and The London Design Festival and is a UK Business Ambassador for the creative industries. Since 2013 he has been both instigator and key member of The Creative Industries Federation whose mission is to join up public arts, commercial creative companies and education in order to support the talent development required to navigate the challenges of the decades to come.* I am totally out of my depth.

Sorrel Hershberg, who has kindly organised the meeting, greets me at the front desk of Somerset House. I know Sorrel thanks to the meetings she has organised to promote John and Frances' National Art and Design Saturday Clubs. It's the Saturday Clubs that I'm here to talk about, but I momentarily forget this when Sir John arrives. I am suddenly at a loss. What I want to say is simple: The government are fucking-up education with continued cuts and attacks on the communities the students come from, and kids in poor areas haven't got a chance without support and that we have to do something about this. Instead I stutter about the importance of art for art's sake, about art education supporting the needs of the community and how we must allow post-school art and design to flourish. John sits patiently and listens to me ramble. Then he tells me that I am wrong. He says that we have to go back to school, right back to childhood and provide the opportunity for children to be involved in the arts, to be engaged and excited by them; that parents and teachers need to be educated in the transformative potential of arts qualifications; that design is vital to the UK economy and that we must influence kids at the point where they choose their options. At this point, I make a choice of my own. I choose to speak less and to listen more.

"The trouble is when you are paying £9,000 a year just in tuition fees the risk of failure can seem too great. Any time spent organizing a protest for change is time spent away from studying. The saying in business that time is money has also become true for education. Boundaries are being blurred by higher education returning to a commodity rather than a right."

— Leah Craven, ex student, Blackburn College

John sees it all clearly, the links between discovering, encouraging and nurturing talent, feeding our world class arts schools and driving up a failing economy through trade, design and ideas. He calls it the Kebab Model, skewering Primary, Secondary, Tertiary education and professional practice together. He is a staunch supporter of education, opportunity and enterprise. He is at once nostalgic for the past, or at least the best of it (launching the Saturday Arts Clubs, his own experiences in developing his design skills after being spotted by a teacher) and at the same time fiercely innovative in his drive to develop new ideas, initiatives and technologies. It is an intoxicating mix that refuses to be bogged down in party politics. "I've worked with different governments," he says, "I started under Thatcher." He exudes a just-get-on-with-it approach. Where it's broken, fix it. Much of the responsibility, he tells me, lies with the creative industries themselves. It is their obligation to recruit through aspiration, to demonstrate transparency on how to get there, and what can be expected when students arrive.

We talk about widening participation, the gender balance in art and design education, the importance of role models and the need for regions outside of London to retain their home-grown talent, both in their universities, colleges and local economies. It's a difficult subject for me. I see the argument, but it's predicated on a long period of sacrifice – what Sir John estimates as the first five years, building it. That's great for the graduates in year six, obviously, but lousy for the first five. Personally, I am still in favour of students achieving their full potential and broadening their horizons if they can. Often the best way to do this is to leave. It's a story as old as the hills, but I hope that investment and a reversal in the cuts to public arts funding, and so on, will, over time, encourage graduates to come and work outside of London and the other major cities. Perhaps some will then return home and bring their newfound expertise with them.

As I leave, Sir John reiterates his commitment to Saturday Clubs for art, to start the process as early as possible and not only for art; he plans to develop more clubs that cover other creative outcomes. John Sorrell doesn't see barriers: his designer's brain seeks only solutions. It's what he does.

On the train home I scan newspaper articles about the increasing middle class colonisation of the arts. The debate has drawn a diverse crowd of actors, artists, designers and musicians all stating that, should they have their time over again now, none of them would have made it in such a climate of privilege and entitlement. One broadsheet article features a large photograph of Jarvis Cocker to make its point. Most notable on the posh debate, however, is Shadow Minister Chris Bryant's public spat with singer James Blunt (who Bryant noted as being from a privileged background). Blunt, of course, takes it personally, but what Bryant says in reply (published in *The Guardian*) is this: "…it is really tough forging a career in the arts if you can't afford the enormous fees for drama school, if you don't know anybody who can give you a leg up, if your parents can't subsidise you for a few years whilst you make your name and if you can't afford to take on an unpaid internship. You see, the thing is, I want everyone to take part in the arts. I don't want any no-go areas for young people from less privileged backgrounds. And I'm convinced that we won't be Great Britain if we waste great British talent in the arts."

Bryant is right, because success in the arts is predicated on personal debt. These creative students, who everyone, except perhaps Jacob Rees-Mogg, agrees are vital to the cultural, economic future and general wellbeing of all, are expected to enter into student loans – let's call them what they are, debt agreements – that are often larger than their parents' mortgages. They are expected to move to the city and pay city-centre rents, purchase extortionate tube passes and art materials and work for free with the odd slice of toast here and there to sustain them.

Nostalgia may allow my generation to remember our own student days as pound-a-pint, living-on-own-brand-beans penury, but having our fees covered was never something we would ever have thought could or would be withdrawn. London has always been expensive in relation to small towns, of course, but grants, access to benefits, cheap rents and space and time to develop and emerge now feel like the luxury of those who went before. They are not the reality of those studying now.

Would I make it to Chelsea if I were applying now? I'm not sure I'd even make the train fare. With all this talk of the creative industries being worth £77 billion to the economy, and that our artists and designers are the bit of Britain that's great, then my real question is: Why would anyone put up barriers that will inevitably prevent a creative person, of any age, going to art college? Perhaps it's because the real value of an art school education is actually in the potential to empower and influence through cultural participation and inspiration. These are seen as dangerous and unpredictable activities in some quarters, yet they are surely vital to a nation that continues to wrap itself in the flag of free speech and creative liberty.