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Art Matters: Studios, Material Diversity and Neoliberalism

The past twelve months have seen a wonderful wealth of exhibitions indebted to sustained material investigation and the physicality of aesthetic experience; Frank Auerbach (Tate Britain), Phyllida Barlow (Fruitmarket), Marlena Dumas (Tate Modern) and Ellen Hyllemose (Fold) to name but a few. These practices tap into my fundamental preoccupation with stuff, a sensibility derived from the landscape of my childhood spent in the rolling hills, forests, soot, rust and general muck of South Yorkshire. It is this insatiable need to 'make contact with matter', to purloin the words of Robert Smithson, that has kept me making, thinking and writing about art for more than twenty years. It is this commitment to the matter of matter, however, that prompts me to question the sustainability of art's material diversity in the present age of neoliberal economics.

In the last two years UK arts journals have carried articles that have disclosed, critiqued, satirised and lamented the impact of the current economic climate on art. Amongst other topics, features have focussed on the widening participation gap, the competitive culture of public funding that has driven a wedge between arts organisations and of course the voracious appetite of a market which is insensible to the difference between economic and aesthetic value. As J J Charlesworth astutely pointed out in last December's edition of *Art Review*, however, the role of criticism should not to be endlessly jump up and down about the excesses of the market or, more worryingly, find strategies to endorse them. If what Charlesworth calls the 'real value of art' is going to drive debates about the impact of neoliberalism then that conversation has to expand beyond art's consumption. What is needed, to borrow from anarchist, poet and art critic Herbert Read, is attention to the situation from the 'bottom upwards,' in the studios of becoming and established artists.

In 1971 Daniel Buren firmly placed the hand of the studio in the glove of the art market. Like so many others whose work would come to define the so-called cultural turn, Buren mistook Clement Greenberg's version of Modernism for the only version. For him art made in the studio was all the same, discretely produced, infinitely manipulable and ergo transportable; in other words 'made-to-measure.' In order to increase the reach of art beyond the 'ivory tower' and make it an agent of diversity rather than homogeneity it had to come out of the studio into the streets. The validity of the cultural turn's battle against inherent class privilege, misogyny and ethnocentricism that governed institutions of art and culture is not in question. The side effect of cultural turn was, however, that discursivity and representation were given primacy at the expense of the matter of materials.

Under this economy of subject rather than matter the enigmatic nature of material-led practices seemed to be clinging to a mode of aesthetic experiences that was decidedly Modernist and, according to Greenberg, exclusive. In this situation the studio began to look more and more like an ailing cultural dinosaur, sustained by tradition rather than necessity. As Phyllida Barlow noted in Frieze (2006) while still teaching at the Slade, fine art courses became increasingly driven by ideas and thus open to a transdisciplinary curriculum that bypassed sustained engagement with materiality. This curriculum has both compounded and softened the blow of shrinking resources for studio-based, skill intensive Higher Education courses under the present fees structure. Courses are sustained by higher recruitment which means more bodies in the same or smaller, often desk-based spaces and higher student-staff ratios. Working at such close quarters discourages the messy, noisy, dusty, smelly, wet materialisation of art because it impacts on peers, constraining the development

of tacit learning, knowledge and thus the physicality of young artists' ambitions. Those institutions who have been in a position to provide new buildings for their arts courses boast light and airy 'social' spaces, which impress on Open Day at the expense of more vital, less architecturally glamorous and presumably less 'social' studio provision. Students are thus pulled away from the studio from all angles, spending less and less time making, being with the stuff they make and talking it through with their peers.

This damaging reduction of skills-based teaching and resources in Higher Education has been acknowledged by the Warwick Report (2015). It has called for additional funding for the Higher Education Funding Council HEFCE to safeguard the development of future 'creative talent' by providing 'additional funding for intermediate-cost studio-based subjects and institution specific funding.' The Warwick Report's findings come, critically speaking, as the tide is turning from the cultural to the material. It has been since the late 90s and early 2000s when artists-cum writers like Barbara Bolt, Paul Carter, James Elkins, anthropologist Tim Ingold and political scientist Jane Bennett dared to think about the value of making as a mode of thinking about and being in a sensuous material world. Symposia and publications on materials and materiality now abound; even *Art History* had a special issue on materiality in 2013. In this context, as artist Rebecca Fortnum has persuasively argued the studio must be acknowledged as a space of speculative, generative, material exploration that is vital to the creative process.

Central to the Warwick Report is its commitment to creativity as the driving force in the social and economic wellbeing of the population as a whole; a vision that strongly echoes with Herbert Read's 1941 call for a 'creative civilisation.' In order to achieve that aim, the report argues that artists, designers and arts organisations must make sustained engagements with 'place,' that is the local communities that are home to their offices, studios and exhibition spaces. In the current economic climate there is, however, a significant obstacle to the realisation of this recommendation and that is the difficulty of sustaining permanent studio spaces in a climate of commercial property development.

Duncan Smith, Artistic Director at ACAVA, the Association of Cultural Advancement Through Visual Art, laid the situation out in no uncertain terms; the consistent 'exploitation of land and space in London is threatening the *cultural survival of the city*.' The impact of urban development is being felt by creative start-up businesses and studio providers but also in the working practices of more established artists. In February 2016 I visited the sculptor Alison Wilding at her recently relocated Tannery Arts Studio in Bermondsey, London. Wilding has moved from a 2000Sq Ft space to a 700 Sq Ft temporary studio, the impact on her working practice is obvious. Her building, which also contains *The Drawing Room*, has been sold to developers. As per the recommendations of the Warwick Report some studio space and *The Drawing Room* will be retained as part of the development of luxury accommodation. But will that studio provision be of an adequate size and 'affordable'? Even for one of Britain's foremost sculptors working today? After all Wilding's practice isn't about making money it is about making art with aesthetic and material integrity.

The situation in London is acute but by no means isolated; two major artist-run studios in Manchester and Liverpool are also on the move as their accommodation has also been sold to developers. My question is how can mid to large scale material exploration take place and communities engage with those practices when their relationship to the spaces they inhabit is by and large transitory and marked by uncertainty? We may be on the cusp of a new era in the understanding of the value of art's materiality and its capacity to widen artistic participation. My fear is that the impact of the present economic climate on the ground, in the studios of becoming and established artists, is stacking the odds against the material diversity of art practice in the future.

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