

The Formation of the Art–Education–Dispositive in England

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Abstract

This paper offers an insight into the involvement of artists in education in England, tracing its beginnings in the 18th century. Taking the Foundling Hospital and the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (SfA) in London as examples, its changing politics and its persistent rivaling discourses are discussed. The links of these developments with the practices and discourses of the Empire are examined.

The first public art institutions in England evolved at a time when Britain was expanding its global dominance as the largest colonial economic force. By 1720, London had displaced Amsterdam as Europe's leading center of trade. In the mid 18th century, 30% of households with an annual income of 40 pounds or more earned twice the necessary minimum income. The landed gentry, a growing presence in parliament, had taken over parts of the nobility's decision-making power.ⁱ The gentry's repertoire of social advancement included the possession of art. Beginning with the end of the 17th century, their acquisitions fueled an art market that evolved to be the largest in Europe. Men of wealth built collections in their country estates, which were accessible only to men of the same social rank.ⁱⁱ The practice of collecting, buying, selling, displaying and viewing art expressed more than just the appropriation of nobility's power insignia. The collection was one of the techniques with which the upper ranks of society created themselves as cultural, social and political core of the "nation" or "civil society".ⁱⁱⁱ While France, Germany and the Netherlands already used their respective National Galleries as an instrument of national representation, the English upper middle class was not initially interested in such an institution.

From their perspective, the National Galleries in the neighboring countries were either expressions of republican disposition or served to legitimize aristocracy by demonstrating its alleged liberality. The founding of such a public institution would have amounted to an illegitimate appropriation of their own "doing nation".^{iv}

The gentry's collecting practice afforded the existence of a rank of economically independent artists. For the first time, painting was perceived as legitimately English, with William

Hogarth as its most eminent exponent.^v The artists saw it as their role to advocate social concerns and public welfare. Their contributions were part of a surge of charitable involvement of the social elite in the 18th century. This involvement was based upon the discourses of enlightenment and of the empirism developed in the writings of Locke and Hume.^{vi} Alleged natural laws were translated into social conditions and it was assumed that the application of the former would lead to an improvement of the latter. In its bourgeois reception, this improvement-discourse involved the constant working on and circulation of suggestions to solve social problems^{vii} as well as philanthropy. While the standard of living was constantly improving for the middle class, the number of paupers increased, due to population growth and the accumulation of capital.^{viii} The growing pauperization in the cities became a publicly discussed problem. In 1723 the General Workhouse Act was issued, which allowed companies to build workhouses. The detainment of the socially disadvantaged in workhouses financially disburdened the communities, while the private operators enriched themselves by exploiting the detainees' cheap labor.

This procedure shows more than just formal resemblances to the contemporaneous practice of importing slaves and enslaving the population of the evolving colonies. Ann McClintock's study *Imperial Leather* describes the complex connection of the categories race, gender and class, which had been evolving since the 16th century in the course of expeditions and colonization. Drawing on numerous examples from the visual and literary productions of these times, McClintock shows that the relationship of citizens/colonists both with the working class in England and with the slaves/the colonized was characterized by a double discourse of imperial superiority and paranoid fear of the undrawing of lines or the loss of control. She highlights congruencies between contemporary depictions of the colonized with those of women and of the British working class and poor.^{ix} Like the "primitives", the financially destitute in the English cities were perceived as a threat, and actually experienced as such in the first uprisings. Referring to Foucault's concept of "Technologies of Knowledge", McClintock shows that methods used in the colonial practice, e.g. cartography (and subsequently photography), surveying and travel accounts, as well as the strict regulation of sexual practices, the construction of deviance and the building of race-focused genealogy, served to legitimize the usurpation of the "virgin lands" in the colonies and the exertion of control on the colonized. The territories were conceptualized as "empty," their inhabitants as ahistorical, thus enabling the conquerors to define them as their property, their "discovery." The trope of ahistoricity was subsequently applied to the impoverished classes of the home

country, as were the techniques to control and monitor them. McClintock draws a parallel from the act of “discovering“ territories to the ritual of Christian baptism, which institutionally legitimizes the existence of a child through a symbolic reenactment of the birth and through the act of naming. Both acts expropriate and disavow women and the colonized as powerful agents in the production of origin.^x The power of definition over historicity and the institutional legality of territories or children is appropriated to serve the exercise of domination.

It is remarkable that from this perspective, a central issue of the improvement discourse of the 18th century was the containment of the infant mortality rate, which was extremely high especially among illegitimate or orphaned children.^{xi}

A culminating point for the charitable involvement of artists in London was the “Foundling Hospital for the education and maintenance of exposed and deserted young children,”^{xii} established in 1739 by Captain Thomas Coram (c. 1668-1751). It exemplifies the connection of social-reform-motivated improvement of living conditions with the need to implement social control, which defined the imperial discourse, and the entanglement of the art field in this context.

Coram retired to England after achieving success by establishing a shipwright's business in the American colonies. Under the impression of life in the colonies, where the life of each (white) child was valuable with regard to the future, child mortality in England appeared to be a problem worth dedicating his philanthropic activity to. He was not interested, however, in a political campaign to question the differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate children, or to debate the practice of sexual exploitation of e.g. maidservants in households of the nobility and the upper middle class. Instead, he founded the first home to provide illegitimate and orphaned children with shelter, support and education. It still took 17 years of campaigning before the hospital was inaugurated. His idea to support illegitimized children met with the resistance of his contemporaries, who argued that such a scheme would encourage extramarital relations. Among Coram's supporters was William Hogarth. Hogarth was a founding governor and for several years inspector of the hospital's wet nurses. He and his wife Jane fostered foundling children. He designed the hospital's coat of arms as well as the children's inevitable uniforms. He donated paintings for the decoration of the hospital and persuaded colleagues like Reynolds and Gainsborough to do the same. Georg Friedrich Händel also supported the hospital's charitable work by giving performances of his work, enhancing the prestige of the institution and raising funds for its benefit.^{xiii}

The paintings on the Foundling Hospital's walls in fact constituted London's first public art gallery. The contributing artists perceived it as an opportunity to enhance their profile^{xiv}. Artists received no remuneration for the paintings they donated, but were provided with the opportunity to show them to potential buyers –the wealthy supporters of the institution. In addition, the artists who donated paintings were made “artist-governors” in recognition of their generosity, thus becoming part of the hospital's executive committee. This title, one of the few professional accolades obtainable for artists, was an important means of social distinction.^{xv} The debates at the annual meeting of the artist-governors promoted the artists' idea to institutionalize public exhibitions of contemporary art. They became the key impulse for the founding of the Royal Academy in 1768.

The Paintings shown in the Foundling hospital were chosen and displayed with an educational agenda. As the hospital building, created by architect Theodore Jacobsen^{xvi}, was designed to impress donors with its classical elements and to awe children and single mothers with its monumental sternness, the images were addressed to two different groups as well. In the lavishly outfitted assembly hall of the governors and donors, large-scale images of biblical scenes were displayed,^{xvii} showing the salvation and blessing of young children. The fireplace was surrounded with a white marble relief, by John Michael Rysbrack, titled *Charity Children engaged in navigation and husbandry*. Hinting at the future productivity of the children detained in the orphanage, it re-interpreted the charitable donations into an investment, as Coram had intended. The walls of the children's dining-hall, on the other hand, displayed large-scale portraits of the most eminent of the Hospital's supporters, so as to constantly remind the children to whom they owed their meals.^{xviii}

In England, William Hogarth and his colleagues constituted the first group of artists to work independently, or, in the words of Arnold Hauser, the first group of committed artists.^{xix} Their involvement with the Foundling Hospital indicates that artists, as members of the evolving class of citizens and intellectuals in the 18th century, actively participated in the discourse on public welfare and social improvement.

At the same time, two notions of art developed in England, both competing and interdependent, in which issues of art's educational role in nation-building and in the improvement of social conditions are articulated.

In 1749 the architect John Gwynn published an “Essay on Design“. In his text, he advocates drawing lessons for children of all social backgrounds: “There is scarce any mechanic, let his

employment be ever so simple, who may not receive advantage from it.^{xxx} He further proposed the founding of a national Art academy. Both projects were conceived within the larger frame of competing with France, the other large colonial power, for global dominance. Gwynn points out that the French cultural supremacy is due to its art academy and emphasizes that, “Were such an academy imitated and improved upon, London would become a Seat of Arts, as it is now of Commerces, inferior to none in the Universe.”^{xxxi} In 1794, William Shipley, English painter and social reformer, founded the membership-based Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (SfA), “to embolden enterprise, enlarge science, refine arts, improve our manufactures and extend our commerce.”^{xxii} This society granted awards, the so-called “premiums”, for drawing, painting, and sculpture, as well as for carpet manufacturing or the production of cobalt and madder, as the textile production was one of the country’s most important businesses and an area where technical innovations of industrialization were tried and tested.^{xxiii} Members of SfA were predominantly gentry: merchants, politicians, artists, and intellectuals. Their overall values are reflected in the notion of “public taste”, propagated by the SfA and reaching far beyond a formal-aesthetic judgment: “morality, right thinking and commercially useful skills.”^{xxiv} To possess these skills meant license for social advancement. To acquire them should, according to the SfA, be possible for everyone with the required physical, material and mental disposition.^{xxv} The SfA was committed to supporting these education processes, partly through working on proposals for a school reform, which should guarantee school education to destitute children.

Shipley ran a drawing school on the SfA’s premises, which on the one hand taught the design rules for textile ornaments to the manufactory workers, on the other hand trained and supported “polite artists“ in painting and sculpture.^{xxvi} In the drawing classes as well as in viewing, art was considered mainly as one tool among others for social and political optimization and control. In this sense, the SfA was an institution for the establishment and circulation of a utilitarian notion of art, as Colin Grigg describes it in his study on the ideological foundations of the arts council.^{xxvii} Grigg differentiates between two notions of art which were predominant in the 18th century and have an impact on British discourse to this day: he calls them “intuitionist“ and “utilitarian“. The intuitionist notion of art was based on the idea that universal values such as truth or beauty exist outside of specific contexts and that deeds can be right or wrong, irrespective of their results. In this, it favored Kant’s disinterested pleasure in viewing art. The utilitarian notion of art, on the other hand, stressed

the social utility of art, in the sense of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.” In this perspective, values such as truth and beauty are dependent on the context in which they were judged. In the SfA’s practice to stimulate performance by awarding prizes in the categories “Polite Arts (painting and sculpture), Agriculture, Chemistry, Colonies & Trade, Manufactures und Mechanics^{xxviii}, both notions of art are not to be clearly distinguished. This led to a conflict that became decisive for the future structure of the art field.

Since 1760, the art committee of the SfA organized an annual public exhibition of contemporary British art. Inside the SfA, the art committee—with artists such as Hayman, Reynolds, Wilson or Ramsay among its members—opposed the utilitarian bias. They lobbied against awards and in favor of improved working conditions for “polite artists“. At the outset, the artists wanted to raise an entrance fee of one shilling for the exhibition, “to exclude the lawless and potentially violent mob.“^{xxix} The proceeds were to be assigned to benefit old or invalid artists. Shipley, however, refused to make the SfA’s rooms available if an entry fee was charged. It was finally agreed to admit visitors free of charge, but to produce a catalogue for sale. The first show, which opened on April 21st 1760, was an unexpected success. In only two weeks, 6582 catalogues were sold, and an estimated 20000 visitors saw the show. In the afternoons, the venue was open to SfA members only, so it was hopelessly overcrowded in the mornings. SfA staff had been given orders to regulate number and composition of the audience. “Improper persons“ were not allowed into the exhibition, “footsoldiers, livery servants, porters, women with children and forms of disorderly behaviour like smoking and drinking^{xxx} were marked as unwelcome. Nevertheless, in the records of the SfA complaints of the artists can be found about “the intrusion of persons whose stations and education disqualified them for judging statuary and painting, and who were made idle and tumultuous by the opportunity of attending a show.”^{xxxi}

In dealing with this first exhibition, traits can be observed which to this day form structural, conflicting as well as interdependent interests: democratization efforts, control, and exclusion in favor of social distinction. The SfA wanted to reach as broad a public as possible, and in reports of the exhibition it was especially mentioned that for many visitors, this was probably their first encounter with art.^{xxxii} At the same time, however, the mass of the audience was seen as a threat for the art, which had to be monitored. The public the polite artists meant to address was the one they saw themselves as part of: upper middle-class, enabled to judge art by taste. The “others“ were seen as intruders, tempted to idleness and disturbing the exhibition with their rackets behavior.

The artists subsequently tried to enforce entry fees and security checks. Their failing to do so was one of the reasons that led to the group breaking away from the SfA and to the founding of the Royal Academy of the Arts.

This paper tried to show that the establishing of galleries and museums as institutions of education is a project linked to colonial discourse whose longevity may be attributed to the fact that it has been morally and financially supported by diverse interest groups and institutions across ideological boundaries. The underlying thesis is that a binary opposition between the “emancipatory” and the “disciplining” effects of gallery education has been continuously structuring its discourse from the beginning in the 18th century until today. This binary opposition should therefore finally be questioned in favour of an approach to gallery education as a critical practice beyond dichotomic constructions.

ⁱ With the Magna Carta, the British Kingdom knew Parliaments as early as the 13th century: gatherings where the king “parleyed” with aristocratic policy makers. After 1471, the Parliament consisted of 250 knights and citizens in the House of Commons and 100 members of church and nobility in the House of Lords, who held the legislature instead of the king. At the beginning of the 18th century, civic rights and access to political functions or educational institutions were still granted to members of the Church of England only, and until the middle of the 19th century, members of the Cabinet came mostly from families of the nobility. T.A. Jenkins, *A short History of Britain*, Oxford 2001, p. 49ff.

ⁱⁱ Duncan points out that this was perceived as public accessibility, as the notion of a public defined as mostly participative did not exist at the time. Carol Duncan: *Civilizing Rituals. Inside Public Art Museums*, London and New York, 1996.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ian Pears, *The Discovery of Painting: The Growth of Interest in the Arts in England, 1680 – 1768*, New Haven and London, 1988. p.3, quoted in Duncan, 1996, p.36.

^{iv} Duncan, 1995, S. 37

^v Maurer points out that until the beginning of the 18th century, painting was perceived as “a foreign art, which mostly foreigners excelled at”. Michael Maurer, *Kleine Geschichte Englands*, Stuttgart, 2002.

^{vi} John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690. Based on Locke, David Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in 1748 delineates the organization of human conceptions along the lines of the organizing principles of Newton’s law of gravity.

^{vii} 1677 Andrew Yarranton published *England’s Improvement by Sea and Land*. Between 1701 and 1750 more than 250 “Proposals for Improvement” had been published by diverse interest groups and individuals to regulate a variety of economic, cultural and social concerns—as e.g. a “Proposal for the encouragement of seamen“, or “for the due regulation of servants“. D.C.G. Allan, *William Shipley, Founder of the Royal Society of Arts. A Biography with Documents*, London, 1976, p. 16.

^{viii} 1701 the population of England and Wales amounted to 5,3 million, 1761 to 6, 7 million, to be more than doubled until 1831. Maurer, 2002, p. 287f.

^{ix} McClintock, 1995, pp. 31 ff.

^x McClintock, 1995, pp. 29 ff.

^{xi} Over 74% of children born in London died before they were five. In workhouses the death rate increased to over 90%. The number of children marked as illegitimate increased due to the sexual exploitation of destitute women and maidservants. Rhian Harris, *The Foundling Hospital*. BBC History Series, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/foundling_01.shtml] as of 9.8.2005.

^{xii} See D.C.G. Allan, *William Shipley, Founder of the Royal Society of Arts. A Biography with Documents*. London, 1976.

^{xiii} The tradition of “Live Aid” concerts thus dates back to the era of enlightenment.

^{xiv} The collection of the Foundling Hospital also included a few works by female artists, especially paintings by Emma Brownlow King (1858 – 1933).

^{xv} Brian Allen, “Art and Charity in Hogarth’s England.” In: Rhian Harris, Simon, R. (ed.): *Enlightened Self-interest. The Foundling Hospital and Hogarth*. London, 1997, p.10.

^{xvi} Until then, Theodore Jacobsen’s best-known design was the house of the East India Company.

^{xvii} Francis Hayman: *The Finding of the Infant Moses in the Bulrushes*, 1746; Joseph Highmore: *Hagar and Ishmael*, 1746, 173 x 193 cm; Hogarth: *Moses Brought before Pharaoh’s Daughter*, 1746, 127,7 x 208,3 cm; James Wills: *The Little Children Brought before Christ*, 1746. All oil on canvas.

^{xviii} This is shown on a watercolor by John Sanders of 1773, titled *The Girls’ Dining Room* (46 – 57,5 cm). Among others, a portrait of Thomas Coram by William Hogarth was displayed in the girls’ dining hall. Reproduced in Harris, Simon, 1997, p. 25.

^{xix} “Actually, it is only from this time on [after the artists had become independent of princely, courtly or official patronage, CM] that we have an art which is committed and which is binding on itself. It can become committed only after it can no longer ‘become committed’ by others.” Arnold Hauser, *The Sociology of Art*, translated by Kenneth J. Northcott, Routledge: London, Henley and Melbourne 1982, p. 293.

^{xx} John Gwynn, *An Essay on Design, Including Proposals for Exciting a Public Academy to be supported by Voluntary Subscription*. London, 1749. Quoted in: D.G.C: Allan, 1970, p. 18.

^{xxi} Ibid.

^{xxii} Subsequently *Society for the Arts* and from 1908 *Royal Society for the Arts*: www.rsa.org.uk

^{xxiii} In 1776, a cotton mill was built in Cromford as a first prototype of modern factories.

^{xxiv} Nicholas Pearson, *The State and the Visual Arts. A discussion of State intervention in the visual arts in Britain, 1760 – 1981*. Milton Keynes, 1982, p.14.

^{xxv} Edmund Burke, a monarchist liberal, whose influential *Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful* was published in 1756, describes “wrong taste” as a nearly pathologic defect of moral judgment, due to a lack of exercise, or, if such exercise has been received, either a weakness of understanding or spiteful ignorance. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1756, quoted in Pearson, 1982, p. 16

^{xxvi} Allan, 1979, p.80.

^{xxvii} Colin Grigg, *The Arts Council. A Question of Values*, MA Masters in Arts Criticism, City University, London, 1992. p. 10ff.

^{xxviii} http://sitoc.biz/adelphicharter/pdfs/RSA_IP_Final.pdf as of 20.2.2009

^{xxix} Brian Allen, “The Society of Arts and the first exhibition of contemporary art in 1760” In: *RSA Journal*, March 1997, p.265. Allen reconstructs the events around the first exhibition on the basis of minutes from the SFA archive.

^{xxx} Allen, Brian: 1997, p. 265.

^{xxxi} Allen, Brian: 1997, p. 266.

^{xxxii} Allen, Brian: 1997, p. 265.