

On the Cultural Value Debate

BFAMFAPhD

Thank you Tom Finkelpearl, and Public Art Dialog, for inviting me to speak with you, and for the responsibility and opportunity to present some of the work that BFAMFAPhD has done this past year. We are here at the College Art Association to talk about student debt, real estate, and the arts. Student debt. Real Estate. The Arts. These three concepts are rarely strung together at the college art association, particularly for a public art dialog. What then is the relationship between student debt, real estate, and the arts? What is the impact of student debt and rising rents on the arts? Before I talk through some of our recent findings at BFAMFAPhD, and describe our group, I would like to clarify the aims of our work, particularly in *Artists Report Back*.¹

Our report is often dismissed by deans, faculty members, and artists alike as a “vocational” argument. They say that by comparing rising tuition with future work (where we compare \$120,000 on art degrees with the reality that nationally only 10% of arts grads make their primary earnings as artists), we reproduce the familiar rhetoric of economic justification in our contemporary cultural value debate, what Belfiore has articulated as value arising from measurable impact (often economic impact) rather than from the value of art as a public good.² We at BFAMFAPhD agree that economic justification is *not* the best way to determine the value of the arts in society, or of an arts education. For us, the value of the arts, and of an arts education, is self-evident. And so we seek to understand and raise awareness about the political economies of the arts to add to a debate about how we can work together to intelligently reform the sector that we value so much.

If you all believe, as we imagine you do, that art allows us to reflect upon the world, that art is a public good, and that artists are lifelong learners and active civic agents then you likely desire artistic expressions by people of every class, race, sexuality, age, ability, and gender expression. Audre Lorde writes so beautifully about how the arts can be a place to share “revelatory distillations of experience” and how the arts have the power to foster understanding and empathy.³ I can say that every arts graduate I know, regardless of their debt burden, tells me that they couldn’t imagine going to school for anything else. Why is this?

Perhaps they want to be supported in an endeavor that is often discouraged by the adults around them. Art is supposed to be a place where difference is accepted and even embraced. Art is a way to make meaning of the labor that we claim for ourselves. We should recognize and honor the deep commitment to the arts and the desire to make art that arts students carry, often propelling them as young people to an arts degree despite an awareness of crippling debt. We should note that most 18-year-olds also have no way to comprehend the impact of indebtedness on their future. We should remember that many young people in low income families never get the opportunity to receive a loan or to attend an art class, for that matter.

¹ BFAMFAPhD. “Artists Report Back.” *BFAMFAPhD*. 2014.

² Belfiore, Elenora. “Impact, Value and Bad Economics: Making Sense of the Problem of Value in the Arts and Humanities.” *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*. Vol. 14. Number 1. Print.

³ Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg: Crossing Press. 1984. Print.

Some deep and terrifying reminders: As we all know, our nation is in a student debt crisis. I need not tell you that student debt is over 1.2 trillion dollars, or that average debt levels for all graduating seniors with student loans rose 25% in four years from 2008-2012. At BFAMFAPhD, we see the project of affordable access to higher education, particularly in the arts, which boomed with the GI Bill initially, as under threat. Entire fine arts and liberal arts programs are being cut from higher education, and tenured faculty are finding themselves without jobs (see U. Michigan and U. Souther Maine as examples).⁴

So what is the connection between student debt, real estate, and the arts? Higher education, real estate, and the arts have been transformed by financialization.⁵ We see the rise of federally backed private loans (though this ended in 2010), the Real Estate Investment Trust, and art as an asset class for financial investment. While we at BFAMFAPhD are no experts on financialization (though we welcome these contributors if you're here in the audience), we do think that a basic understanding of our political economy is necessary to think through what's plausible for future reforms.

Holland Cotter wrote in 2009 that it's "day job time in the arts again", reminding us that Pollock was a busboy that Henry Darger was a janitor.⁶ The difference between an arts graduate or aspiring artist today and these artists, is that Pollock and Darger did not have \$29k in debt for BFAs and more in loans for MFAs. Nor were they facing rent burdens of \$1200 a month. Pollock was in fact supported by the Works Progress Administration, he was paid by our government in a workforce development program that valued the arts.

We call ourselves BFAMFAPhD and continue to ask "what is a work of art in the age of \$120,000 art degrees" because our educational system is being systematically defunded, dismantled and corporatized as we speak. We believe that educating our population is the least expensive way to create a democratic society, and that an arts education is essential to this project. We believe that education is a human right. When the 1.2 trillion dollar student debt bubble bursts, will the government bailout indebted students, as they previously bailed out banks? We fear that they won't. What will we do in this next crisis?

With this preamble, I will begin our presentation.

⁴ Korn, Melissa. "Maine's State Colleges Hit the Skids." *The Wall Street Journal*. 6 January 2015. Web. 19 February 2015.

⁵ La Berge, Leigh Claire. "The Campus Novel as Financial Text: The Work of the Humanities in the Neoliberal University." *Neoliberalism and Literature*. Eds. Rachel Greenwald Smith, Mitchum Huehls. New York University Press, Forthcoming.

⁶ Cotter, Holland. "The Boom Is Over. Long Live the Art!" *The New York Times*, 12 February 2009. Web. 12 February 2015.

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