What London's Student Protests Mean For the Future of Art

by Ben Davis
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Think fast: Which city was more important to the future of art last week, Miami or London?

Miami, of course, gave itself over to the frantic debauchery of the Art Basel Miami Beach week art fairs. And London? With its heavyweight dealers away, the British capital was hit by some of the largest student protests in recent memory. On November 30, as Art Basel VIPs fluttered down to Florida, young people were being set upon by baton-wielding police in Trafalgar Square.

The students were marching against the David Cameron government's proposal to raise college tuition fees and institute a program of stringent austerity that, among other things, involves cutting government funding to art colleges in the United Kingdom to zero. I'll say that again: Cutting funding for art colleges to zero.

The excellent art writer Hannah Forbes Black emailed me a statement from the

students at Goldsmiths College, announcing a weekend of "art action" at the school. Another colleague passed me a link to something called the University for Creative Optimism, which seems to be a rebel collective formed in protest of the cuts, also at Goldsmiths.

On Monday, art students, including some from Goldsmiths, protested at the Turner Prizeceremony, with the slogan "Education should be free for all, not a product for purchase" — and the winner, sound artist Susan Philipsz (a veteran of activist circles herself), responded to the disruption by speaking out in support of the demonstrators. On Tuesday, Goldsmiths students occupied their library, where they have since staged teach-ins and debated strategy. I hear that the arts faculty is very involved. Things are heating up.

I highlight the events at Goldsmiths not because they are absolutely unique; schools and cultural institutions across the U.K. and Europe are being hit by cuts, and students, faculty, and cultural workers are reacting in various ways. I highlight Goldsmiths because, for art watchers, the school is a brand and a symbol. For those with the foresight to look beyond the short-term speculative flipping of artworks, what is happening in New Cross is a portent of things to come.

Let me take you back to the days when Young British Art was actually young. In 1988, a few Goldsmiths students decided to stage a show for themselves, which they called "Freeze," in a warehouse at the London Docklands. They were "insanely young," in the words of their tutor, Michael Craig-Martin, but charged with youthful entrepreneurial ambition. Their ringleader was a bossy 23-year-old student from Leeds, Damien Hirst.

The rest, as they say, is history. In the decades since, "Freeze" has joined the short list of shows organized by hungry artists — from "The First Impressionist Exhibition" to the "Times Square Show" — that changed art history. Of the artists in "Freeze," one, Stephen Park, became a stand-up comic. A second, Steven Adamson, vanished into obscurity. As for the rest, a staggeringly high number — Angela Bulloch, Mat Collishaw, Angus Fairhurst (who later committed suicide), Anya Gallaccio, Gary Hume, Michael Landy, Sarah Lucas — went on to glory. Hirst, of course, became a brand, the one artist most synonymous with the contemporary art market.

You can say a lot of negative things about the YBAs, but you can't say that they didn't matter. Until them, England was known in the visual arts for singular but rare contributions, strong and solitary figures like Turner, Moore, and Bacon. The kids in "Freeze" were united by fearless, adventure-seeking eclecticism — that was the outlook at Goldsmiths, where the art program famously did not distinguish between painting and sculpture. Their success, in fatal symbiosis with U.K. tabloid culture, heralded a new, media-smart kind of art, and made London the art capital it is today. Pretty much all of the trendy work being grabbed from booths down in Miami last week owes something to the style that emerged in the long tail of these Goldsmiths students' scrappy initiative.

The point, of course, is that if you really care about art, you should be at least as preoccupied with the outcome of the bitter struggles over access to education as with the sugar rush of art fairs and the hypnotic whims of speculative capital. At the Frieze Art Fair in October, there was some awareness of this, with a small section devoted to "Save the Arts," a group that has been rallying artists against the cuts — though it was a rather pathetic showing, and placed symbolically at the back. I didn't hear of any similar sliver of self-consciousness from Art Basel Miami Beach.

Well, gray London seems very far away from sunny Miami. But it is closer than you think.

Ten years ago, as an undergraduate, I did a semester abroad at Goldsmiths. Enamored of the headier realms of cultural theory, I went there to study with "The Black Atlantic" author Paul Gilroy. As it turned out, he was off that year, and instead I somehow found myself taking classes on art. I ended up working in a London gallery, and then writing about art. Ten years on, here I am, still writing about art.

How and who gets exposure to education really determines what the art world of the future will be. Narrower access means a narrower, less interesting art world. The U.K. students deserve support. Education should be free for all, not a product for purchase.

Interventions is a new weekly column by ARTINFO deputy editor Ben Davis. He can be reached at bdavis@artinfo.com.