

## CITIZEN ARTIST

### What is a University?

The Citizen Artist team participated in a workshop with post-graduate students and academic staff from Goldsmiths College and Sciences Po Ecole des Arts Politique (SPEAP). The theme under discussion was 'Militant Research' and rather than responding to the topic as a point of conversation, analysing the terminology and examples, the Citizen Artists embraced the opportunity to 'be' Militant Researchers, parodying the idea militancy and prompting members of this specialist group to respond to the question 'What is a University?' The question was framed by the following outline of the problem.

With the state abandoning its commitment to the public good, its duty to its citizens in fostering equity (through welfare, health care, edu

cation and other essential institutions that support civic well being), the point and purpose of a University has increasingly come under scrutiny (Readings, Marquand, et al). The question of understanding what the university is as an entity, as an organisation, as a commercial enterprise is a pressing one for the following reasons:

Historically, the twin pillars of a Nation State have been the government (the legislator) and the university (the educator of its legislators and citizens). Out of the Enlightenment, the university was a space within which individuals 'came into being'. The University fostered 'criticality', 'investigation', 'study' underpinned by a notion of the self in relation to the public sphere where learning was understood and pursued as a value in its own right and/or for the formation of a good citizen, thereby constituting a 'nation'.

This Aristotelian idea of 'coming into being' is captured in the German term 'Bildung'. But at the dawn of the 21st c this Enlightenment project is clearly over. It has been abandoned. With the decline of the Nation State, the "hollowing out of the public sphere", the University's role no longer is prescribed by the need to shape a democratic nation of critically engaged citizens. Instead, in the implementation of neo-Liberal policies the University has been fully converted into a marketplace.



Aspects of the University have quickly adapted themselves to commercial opportunities: on the one hand, finding patronage or business partners within the corporate world and on the other hand, opening themselves up to market demand, providing a 'service' to 'clients' who through consumer choice, determine the alleged value and existence of subject areas.

So for example, scientists convert their 'research' into property and then exploit it, forming independent companies external to the university to sell IP, while conducting their 'research'--i.e., developing their property, within its walls. Teachers are 'consultants' and 'specialists' whose 'advice' can be purchased. Those in the arts and humanities have a slightly more awkward time and are either regarded suspiciously because they

cannot 'compete' with the material applications as seen in the sciences, no doubt partly owing to the fact that the humanities developed out of the Enlightenment and embrace the idea of the Bildung, which of course defies commodification. One strategy used to wriggle out of this dilemma (most notably pursued in North American Universities), is one where professorial 'celebrities' foster a kind of Guru-hood and use the University as an arena to further their intellectual projects all the while accruing financial rewards (higher pay packets etc.) for their popularity in attracting a following of fee paying post-graduates. This strategy has the concomitant advantage of appearing to justify the ideology of enterprise. But even here we have to ask, whom do these intellectual projects serve and to what purpose?



First, if the University is a training ground, a broker, a middleman for industry, why should the young apprentice bother to pay the University for their training? Is it not more effective for the employee to be guided and educated by their prospective employer? Why bother with a University when one could be tutored to fit the employer's needs, training say, physicists or bio-chemists at the headquarters of Dow Chemicals, Shell Oil or with defence contractors? In embracing the idea of being a training ground, the University is no more than a kind of pimp, grooming young minds for the 'military industrial complex'.

If instead we cling to the idea of a University as somehow contributing

to the betterment of 'society', we then have to ask ourselves, what society? For the past 30 years, the 'public' (sphere) has been shredded under the aggressive implementation of neo-Liberal policies. Coupled with technological developments, the rise of the internet and social networks, the economic fallout from the rampant negligence of the city and its wayward financial markets, the idea of a 'society'-- even if we re-conceptualise its form and character and coin new terms for it such as a multitude, a rhizome, an assemblage or a network etc.-- without a state--without a state that sees its role as more than a panopticon -- the 'nation' is but a moral vacuum to which the University is subject.

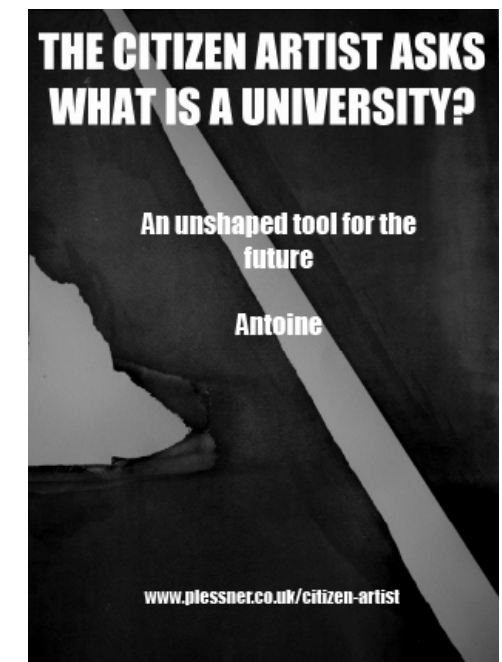
So, again, what is a University? What is it if it no longer nurtures citizens and their 'coming into being'. Are they places for the formation of self-selecting elites within a multitude? Again, who do the elites serve? Other elites such as our powerful neo-feudal corporate masters? Or are universities autonomous communities? In which case, 1) are they not then superfluous, subject to the populist pressures of celebrity culture where rhetorically skilled professors provide intellectual entertainment or 'edu-tainment' for their network of fee-paying acolytes? Or 2), is it simply a space within which intellectual fads are played out and then fade out?

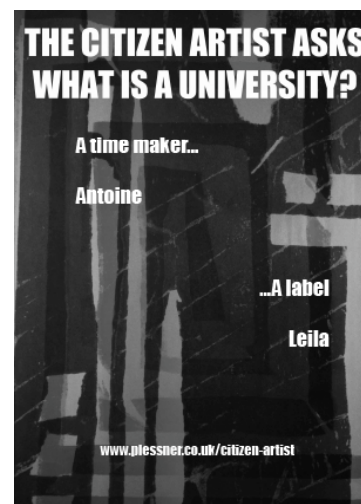
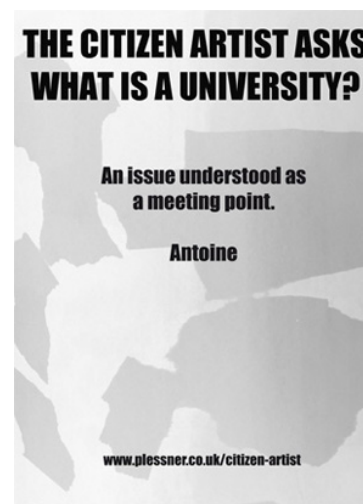
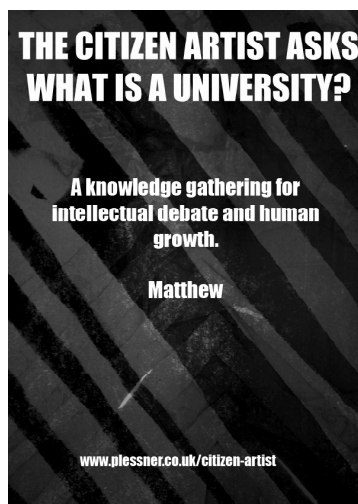
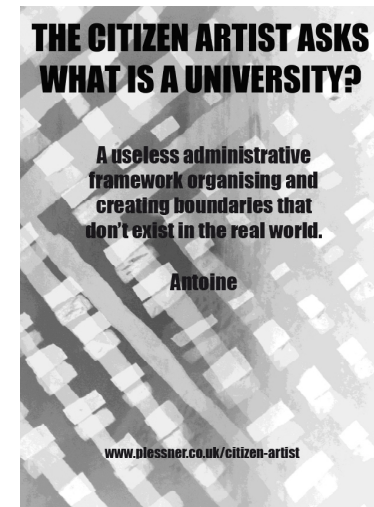
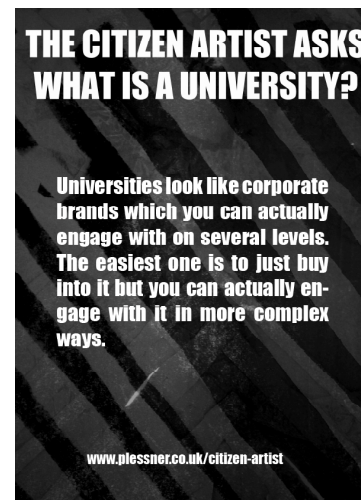
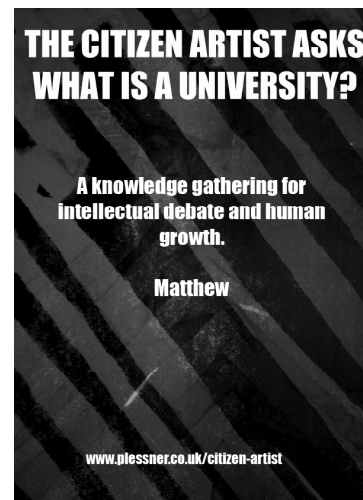
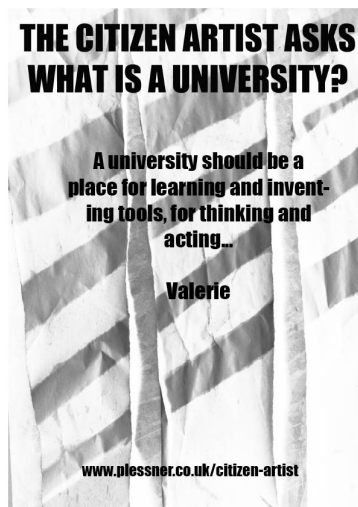
What I have argued above I hope points to a problem of understanding our activities within this place; a problem of understanding who the University serves and where it fits politically within the shifting sands of our times and this bears heavily on how we go about pursuing our various inquiries under its banner. Our 'research' presumably has some value beyond entertainment or material and financial gain? But what is its value and where is it to be situated if the idea of the University as a service provider in a marketplace renders it defunct?

Daphne Plessner  
**Goldsmiths College, 2012**

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The posters above were produced on the same day of the workshop. Following the presentation, members of the workshop were solicited for their views and their quotes formed the basis of the Citizen Artists' 'live-press'. The posters were designed and printed on campus and then distributed around Goldsmiths' by the end of the day. Special thanks to the unsuspecting interlocutors whose views were central to the success of the project.