

## Dean Kenning & Owen Parry: Poor poor school

26 January 2023

Vestibule at Lethaby Gallery

With students from BA and MA Fine Art: David Koh, Eliza Duncan, Ellie Day, Ewan Hindes, & Harriet Hammond.

### An introduction

#### Owen Parry

Hello and welcome to *Poor poor School*, I'm Owen Parry an artists and writer, and as some of you know a lecturer at CSM along with Dean Kenning who is also presenting today, along with group of students from the BA and MA Fine Art including David Koh, Eliza Duncan, Ellie Day, Ewan Hindes and Harriet Hamond. Thank you to Louisa Minkin and the vestibule – fine art takeover team at Lethaby gallery for having us!

A few things about the format of this event: there isn't one. Or rather, *Poor poor School* is an emergent concept, it is unfinished, and has barely even begun. That is to say: *Poor poor school* is in the making. We are going to make it together. It is a school within a school (CSM). But perhaps also a school within a school *within* a school (the vestibule event acting as another kind of school or public within CSM). And as the "poor" title suggest there might be a certain aesthetic quality or ambience; or desire to subvert or challenge or think otherwise about hierarchies of knowledge and value... but it might also fail to be so poor!

We are all interested in some way in what value means and what we come to value or hold dear. Particularly in relation to ideas of taste, class and education. At a time when the subversive, edgy, trashy, antagonist modes of cultural production are so subsumed into mainstream culture – exacerbated by social media and the internet); what kind of endeavour might speak to, critique, or indeed seek an alternative to such a conundrum as the attention economy and neoliberal capitalism? And, at a time of great economic inequality, and networks of disinformation, how are artists, writers and teachers consumed by poor theories and preoccupied with poor things?

A *Poor poor School* might look to philosophers and pop stars and their fans as much as to the emergent ecologies of intelligent mushrooms and writing machines. From William Burroughs and Bryon Gyson's cut-ups as poor stories, to AI writing generators like ChatGBT, which following human prompts produce poor answers. Philosophers Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a "minor literature", which subverts the major languages of power, or Caribbean writer and theorist Sylvia Wynter's notion of a "A little culture" become as useful as concepts to a *Poor poor School* as legendary country and western singer Dolly Parton's prophesy – "It takes a lot of money to look this cheap" – an embodied and exhibitionist critique of the commodification of taste and class in popular culture. Just as AI and the internet (and its uptake in art of late) tends towards the production of poor images; so too do mushrooms, octopi (and... perhaps unicorns) create invisible networks of intelligence, speculative or imperceptible to the human eye. Where there is the poor, there seems to be, in social theorist Raymond Williams' terms, always some kind of "emergent culture".

The school, a place of education, is not outside of this. In fact one of the thoughts I had on visiting the Lethaby Gallery for different Vestibule events over the past few weeks, was how vestibule has made the Lethaby Gallery feel like a place that is accessible to me and I'm sure to many others. I've popped in several times. The doors are open to the public and events are on full view (see: window). The Lethaby Gallery had to me, before this project, always seemed so out of reach – even as a lecturer at CSM. So how might that feel for the student who has just arrived at artschool? And particularly the student whose family or origin have nothing to do with art for whatever cultural reason. How inaccessible or alienating might artschool be for them? But also how exciting!

*Poor poor School* then cannot be another competing brand; but rather thinks of the school as something emergent; in process and incomplete... i.e as yet unbrandable. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in their book *The undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* talk about an “underground of the university”, which sounds very appealing. I've always understood this as the proposition that Education does not only happen in the classroom, in strategic learning exercises for predictable outputs (what some have called the “knowledge economy”); but spills out beyond the school into the cafeteria; the conversations in the lift, or down the pub after class.

But *Poor Poor School* might be careful of seizing on such theories without at least attempting to test them out in practice. So here we are.... We cannot promise that this exercise will be really “poor”. It might be poor at being poor i.e “*Poor poor School*”. But, still, even if failing to be truly poor, a *Poor Poor School* might, I hope, always hold motives against a rich school, or be seeking and testing an alternative.

As we said in the publicity: it's “a diagram of a school, a model of a school carved out of cheap polystyrene”. It is perhaps, a school in search of a school.... It came about because both Dean and I have both been working on notions of “the poor”. Perhaps in different ways. And this seemed liked a good opportunity to meet and share our interests, and to open it up to others to contribute.

So with without further ado....

Text by Owen Parry 2023