

The Pedagogical Impulse

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“This sounds like such a bad idea. As if requiring everyone to get an advanced degree were not enough, now we are supposed to go to school in our free time, voluntarily...” So said the artist Christopher K. Ho in response to a comment of mine in which I claimed that “school is the new lobster”, and perhaps that needs an explanation. Ho has an uncanny ability to tag artworld fashion trends. Years ago it was ‘antlers are hot’, and sure enough, antlers, game trophies, flannel and rough wood siding were soon to be seen in galleries everywhere (none put there by Ho himself); ‘Goth woodsman’ is how he later summed up this ‘aesthetic’. What would be next? ‘Watch out for lobster’; and then there they were, washing up in white boxes and on the pages of glossies everywhere. Ho’s name for this trend? ‘Lesbian lobsterman’ – incongruity intended, no doubt.

But what I’m calling ‘the pedagogical impulse’ is something other than a fashion, which Ho’s response should more than indicate. The aestheticisation of the academic sphere is simply the logical next stage in contemporary art’s primitive accumulation, its colonising of new cultural landscapes and social territories. This trajectory has been in place since the 1960s at least – likely beginning when figures such as Michael Heizer replayed Manifest Destiny’s westward expansion, progressing through a whole range of site-, context- and community-specific, institution-critical and ‘public’ art projects during the 1970s and 80s (at the head of much of which stand both Joseph Beuys and Marcel Broodthaers, though likely back-to-back, with pistols raised), and then venturing ‘indoors’ into dining rooms, coffee shops, lobbies and other so-called relational spaces in the 1990s. At the end of the noughties, with no new territory coming into view on the horizon, well, ‘school is the new lobster’.

I should clarify at this point that the pedagogical impulse is not some ‘future trend’ but rather a sensibility that is here now and has been building for some time. Its latest major manifestation, however, would have to be *unitednationsplaza*, a ‘project’ begun by Anton Vidokle after the cancellation of Manifesta 6 in 2006. Modelled on the European Open University, *unitednationsplaza* brought together luminaries such as Martha Rosler, Boris Groys and Walid Raad to head up a year (2007–8) of seminars on issues and topics of concern to anyone intellectually minded enough to get excited by session titles like ‘Redundancy Following the Lure of Infinite Flexibility’ (credit goes to Liam Gillick for that one).

unitednationsplaza amounted to a kind of seizure of the means of academic production, which is to say of certain academic institutional

forms, by practitioners with an ambivalent relationship to the academy from the beginning. That the academy today is at once the source of artistic and intellectual training and often the object of its scorn, that it provides a living when (or while) other projects (those paintings, this novel, that cycle of philosophical essays) don’t pan out and so serves as a reminder of one’s failures while also offering the ultimate platform for one’s recognition (the last true gauge of success that does not equate, at least not immediately so, to dollars), should not be forgotten. Students, faculty (full-time, visiting and adjunct) and the public pass in and out of (and between) ivory towers with a speed and facility that was once anathema to the very idea of higher, let alone ‘elite’, education.

And these porous borders have left the academy visible in a way that it had not been before, a visibility to which Rainer Ganahl’s ongoing *S/L (Seminars/Lectures)* (1995–) series of photographs of the artworld’s favourite academics – Fredric Jameson, Douglas Crimp, Thierry de Duve, etc – and their audiences serves as both symptom and testament. It was only a matter of time before this visibility was seized upon by smart people such as Vidokle. Likewise, it is only fitting that the other institution that has experienced increased porosity in past decades, the art museum, would become the site of *Night School*, the second iteration of Vidokle’s pedagogical project, which took up residence at the New Museum between 2008 and 09. Other museums have been quick to follow suit: SFMOMA appropriated the endeavour last fall with its own *Pickpocket Almanack* (‘curated’ by Joseph del Pesco), a free ‘school without walls’ convened largely online and which takes its cue from various Bay Area cultural events. ‘School’ as opposed to ‘education’ is the key distinction here, I think: the former implies institutional weight, the latter only an open and inquisitive mind.

‘Class’ is the other term of art at the moment, and it is one that is being taken on by Jennifer Dalton and William Powhida, two artists whose work spends a good deal of time picking through the less savoury parts of the artworld’s carcass in order to serve up to view its fatty tissue and gristle. Their collaborative project, appropriately titled *#class*, is billed as a ‘think tank’ that will be open to public participation – as well as question – through ‘performances, discussions, and uncategorisable art-like events’, all that goes into the conception, production and sale of works of art. The artists’ aim is to teach something about how the art market works by ‘challenging’ its operational assumptions, which Dalton and Powhida



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Jimmy Raskin

Born: *lives and works:* Los Angeles

Inseparability vs. Simultaneity (3 Renderings. #1), 2008,
mixed media, 122 x 108 x 72 cm. Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York



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Anton Vidokle

Born: Moscow, *lives and works:* New York

Night School, 2008. Courtesy New Museum, New York



↑

Pablo Helguera

Born: Mexico City, **lives and works:** New York

Parallel Lives, 2003, still from performance at MoMA, Gramercy Theater, 8 December 2003.
 Courtesy the artist and Galería Enrique Guerrero, Mexico City

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Jennifer Dalton & William Dowhida

Live and work: New York

#class Purchase Application, 2010, pencil and coloured pencil on paper.
 Courtesy Schroeder Romero + Shredder, New York, and Winkleman Gallery, New York





BHQFU

Courtesy Bruce High Quality Foundation, New York

claim are '(1) that most art is produced in private by individual artists and (2) [most art] is presented as a finished product ready for consumption'. Whether the public that goes to #class will be anything other than the one already familiar with such challenges seems doubtful, but setting the table with the problem of how social class relates to education would seem worthwhile, though one would have to admit that this dish has been well prepared by certain prominent academics, such as Walter Benn Michaels in his searing *The Trouble with Diversity* (2006).

Ganahl's photographic project is doubly important because it represents for us the two poles that generally govern the pedagogical impulse: the seminar and the lecture. Vidokle's projects tend towards the seminar side, as does the 'university' begun last year by the Bruce High Quality Foundation, the BHQFU, a more tongue-in-cheek but somehow equally earnest attempt to seize the academic means of production. In practice it offers a series of courses derived from its own 'core course', the 'BYOU' or 'Build Your Own University', described as 'the throbbing administrative heart of BHQFU', where 'new courses are proposed, conflicts are resolved, new ones are thought up, and whatever else needs to get done gets done'. A better example of the inmates running the asylum would be hard to find, and perhaps that is exactly the point of the BHQFU and the collaborative ethos of the Bruces themselves.

But somewhat like nature, authority abhors a vacuum, and it is ultimately authority upon which pedagogy depends. The BHQFU was established in response to a 'crisis' in arts education: the questioning of its authority as a means of educating artists, when that education, cast as training and credentialing, only served as a thinly veiled but often very expensive commercial brand (this is of course the crisis of higher education in general). The test of the Bruces's university will be if it can establish its authority *in place* of the industry that administers advanced degrees (which would make it revolutionary) rather than simply existing alongside it as a salve to the bruised artistic conscience (which would remainder it to the growing inventory of collaborative pedagogical 'projects'), or as simply the next cool thing to do (which would make it fashion).

Pablo Helguera is perhaps the artist most self-consciously engaged with these questions, and he has even proposed a new concept, 'transpedagogy', through which to understand what artists are up to when

they submit to pedagogy as a medium for creating art. As the director of adult and academic programmes in MoMA's Department of Education and perhaps the most sustained practitioner of the 'performance lecture', which he has been executing for more than a decade (the texts of which have been compiled in his book *Theatrum Anatomicum*, 2009), Helguera is unique in having tarried with pedagogical problems as both artist and administrator. (One supposes Mark Leckey deserves mention at this point too; but really, what else are works such as *Cinema-in-the-Round*, 2008, and *Mark Leckey in the Long Tail*, 2009, than vehicles meant to spotlight the artist, and his ego, on center stage?) Helguera's projects have ranged from duelling lectures (*Theatrum Anatomicum*, 2003) to faux panel discussions (*The First Imaginary Forum of Mental Sculpture*, 2004) to very sincere enquiries into ways of learning (*Parallel Lives*, 2003). It is in *Parallel Lives* that we find this gem of a line: "Perhaps it means that imprinting an indelible message in the minds of others is a high task and may be the product of a very strong belief, but it is always an endeavour of love." One would be hard pressed to find a better definition of what (one would hope) animates the pedagogical impulse.

Central to Helguera's work is that it turns on the exchanges of authority between institutional formats (panels, lectures, seminars); the 'subjects supposed to know' that inhabit them (artists, critics, curators, scholars); and importantly, what the pieces themselves have to say – that is, their content. Content is often the key to deciphering just what it is that the artist is up to in pieces like these. The settings may be familiar and the bios of the participants apparently legitimate, but when someone begins speaking in tongues or rattling on about neophallogoepistemicentrism, we know who the joke is on (or at least we think we do).

Though these subjects and settings are crucial to Helguera's idea of transpedagogy, the latter rises or falls with the legitimacy and efficacy of the knowledge that is being put on display. By dint of their complex content and the inventiveness of their delivery, such performances serve as a reminder as to just what it is that is meant to underpin academic authority, and that is *expertise*.

But what in the end constitutes the artist's expertise? It's a scary question, and one not very well served by clichés of 'creativity' and 'nonlinear thinking', or by the ironising gestures of the self-satisfied 'nonexpert' (which is not the same thing as an 'amateur'). Of all the artists labouring under the pedagogical impulse at the moment, perhaps only Jimmy Raskin has fearlessly taken on this question, and even he must come at it on what one might call a 'Nietzschean oblique'. For two decades now, in drawings, sculptures, diagrams, cartoons, installations, videos and performances (many of which adopt the lecture form), Raskin has returned again and again – most recently in *The Annunciation* and *The Disciple's Premature Nostalgia* (both 2009) – to various figures (the poet, the philosopher, the disciple, the tightrope walker, the eagle, the serpent, the ass) from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–5). These are an attempt not just to uncoil the mystery of the poetic act but, importantly, to venture it anew, because, for Raskin, there is no art without analysis (of the self, of the world; of the two in concert), just as there is no analysis without the genuine act of artistic creation. This is more than just knowledge on display; and whether Raskin is successful in uncoiling the nature of art is somewhat beside the point. What is unquestionable is that, as a participant to his researches, one always walks away having learned something.