

Between Radical Pedagogic and Participatory Art Practices

A Conversation on Education as a Radical Social (and Aesthetic) Practice with Marta Gregorčič, Bojana Piškur, Marjetica Potrč and Dmitry Vilensky
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(Art) education became an important issue within visual art practices in the last two years, not only as a mediation of the museum and arts programs but also

as a curatorial practice. It seems that this model was, in all its political urgency, inaugurated by Manifesta 6, which, unfortunately, has never been realized in Nicosia, Cyprus. The concept of the exhibition as an art school, which is very much rooted in the local environment, was then introduced by the curatorial team Mai Abu El Dahab, Anton Vidokle and Florian Waldvogel and is now partly continued by Anton Vidokle's project Unitednationsplaza in Berlin. This is based on the idea of historical experimental learning institutions which combined communal living with an informal class structure and foster the tradition of Free Universities.

Moreover, some art museums have followed this model by concentrating on projects with different groups of participants as well as on closer collaboration with art schools and universities. In the era of global neo-liberalism museums share the same concerns about the demands for simplification of their contents, bureaucratic control and result-oriented culture as the universities, which are now facing the forthcoming "Bologna Accord" with its tendency to homogenize and rationalize higher education in order to gain more accessible and comparable outcomes. Museums as sites of informal learning should, according to Irit Rogoff, foster radical pedagogy "a pedagogy that eschews the simplicity of accessibility to information, experience or cultural capital, and replaces it with questions of access". Rogoff is one of the authors of the project Academy: Learning from Art / Learning from the Museum, initiated last year by Siemens Arts Program in cooperation with the Kunstverein in Hamburg, the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths College in London, the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (MuHKA), and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. It concentrated especially on "gaining access to the urgent and important issues of our day" as the result of radical pedagogy (in a sense how do we get to know things, how do we get to take part in them, how do we have a position ...), but also on linking up the topics activism, participation and artistic practice and demarcating education not only as a model, but also as a field for political participation and cultural creativity.

The following conversation will concentrate more on the issues of participatory practices, related to the theories of Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire and his Pedagogy of the Oppressed. It is based on some questions posed to the protagonists of the project Radical Education, which is being developed by Bojana Piškur, curator, and Marjetica Potrč, artist (<http://radical.temp.si>) and will take place at the Moderna galerija, Ljubljana in 2008.

The idea behind the project is to create an open platform of knowledge production, exchange and dissemination, based on the concept of "education for critical consciousness" as proposed by Paulo Freire. It aims to move onto another level, beyond the institutional critique and at the same time focus on the issues of how to live together beyond neo-liberalism and its understanding of individualism, liberal democracy, and market capitalism. The difference from the already mentioned Academy is that it involves the examples of 'horizontal' and 'bottom-up' education from the politically problematic territories outside Europe, where self-organization and self-education are a necessity to survive. Besides the two authors of the project, I also invited Dmitry Vilensky, a Russian artist and participant of the platform Chto delat / What to be done, as well as the author of Theses on Self-education and Marta Gregorčič, an activist and sociologist, who will contribute her opinion as a "practitioner from the field".

As already mentioned, in the publication Academy, Irit Rogoff refers to museums as places of radical pedagogy. You entitled your project Radical Education. Can you explain what you mean by the term? Who does your project address and who it will involve?

Bojana Piškur: Radical education does not refer to a discipline or a body of knowledge, as Henry Giroux put it, but it suggests a particular kind of practice and a particular posture aimed at questioning received institutions of institutionalized learning and received assumptions regarding knowledge production, exchange and distribution. Radical education is also interdisciplinary in nature, it questions the fundamental categories of all disciplines and it has a public mission of making society more democratic.

What we want to do in our project is to propose different strategies on how various groups can participate in the development and creation of tools, materials and processes which enable them to learn and be capacitated to participate in the world. Emphasis will be put on first-person consciousness engagement and independent /

autonomous thinking which foster learning and not teaching, on construction of participatory knowledge and its dissemination in different socio-cultural contexts. We hope to activate the presumably excluded power outside the art system and the system of education and hopefully break through some presupposed alignments of space and identity.

How would you comment on Freire's belief that "education for critical consciousness has the power to transform reality"?

Marta Gregorčič: Besides cooperation and dialogue, criticism is a prerequisite for social activities. Dialogue became almost completely extinct in the times of capitalism, which works on the principle of shattering and annihilating social bonds. We live in a "mute society", which denies dialogue in order to "respect the law", and disarms any reflection and criticism. Neo-liberal concepts emerge: verbalisms and activism. According to Freire, verbalisms sacrifice action, and activism lacks reflection.

Freire's revolutionary practice – transforming society through education for critical consciousness – is already being applied in South America, especially in the country which has been the first to elect a member of the native population as president. Freire claimed that democracy should become a way of life before it becomes a political form. The peoples of today's Bolivia realize this direct democratic life in such a manner that they demand the radicalization of Morales's policy every day by direct political practices (demonstrations, etc.). The election of an "impressionable government" a bit over a year ago, has not ended their fight for egalitarian society – it has only begun.

What do the terms "horizontal" and "bottom-up" education mean?

Marjetica Potrč: With horizontal distribution of knowledge I referred to a practice developed in Acre, Brazil. In 2006, I spent two months in Acre, the Amazonian state of Brazil. During the last fifteen years, Acre has been pixelizing itself into new territories, such as extraction reserves and Indian territories, along with sustainable urban territories. These new territories are the result of collaboration between the government and local communities. I need to add that the creation of extraction reserves – or protected areas, as they were recently called in an article in the International Herald Tribune – has been a worldwide policy ever since 2004. We are looking at a new territorialization. The communities that live on new territories are self-organized entities and, basically, bottom-up initiatives. They focus on empowering their own people. Education is their primary concern. Education – learning and sharing knowledge – is a crucial issue for the new territories in Acre, but the same may be said for the whole Brazil and beyond. We have learned that the riches of education, though seemingly immaterial, are the guarantee for the material wealth of the nations. Today, the richest countries are those with the strongest educational systems. This awareness is even more important in the context of Brazil, ranked first worldwide according to the gap between rich and poor – which also means there is an immense gap where education is concerned. The new territories of Acre, although wealthy in both natural and intellectual resources, cannot hope to provide this kind of high-quality education the rich world demands. But being so inventive, people of Acre organize things differently. Their goal is to customize education for particular groups in the community. Established hierarchies are put into question, and education is organized in a way that makes sense for the community. An inspiring example is the University of the Forest, whose goal is to bring together the knowledge of rubber-tappers, Indians, academics, and scientists so as to marry local experience with Western science. I should add that the University of the Forest was started 30 years ago; it is based in Cruseiro do Sul, a town in the middle of the forest, with 21 research outposts in the forest (one of these is on a boat) and has for a year now has also organized a high school program called Ceflora. The historian Marcos Vinicius Neves, from Rio Branco, told me that the idea for the University of the Forest first came up during a meeting in the forest town of Marechal Taumaturgo. The idea was to transform the forest town into a big laboratory. In short, people who live in the forest don't want to be objects of the study anymore. They want to share their knowledge on equal terms with others.

Dmitry, do you also find the concept of self-education as self-organization a necessity in the countries where there is a considerable lack of stability in the political sphere and at the same time a lack of appropriate forms of formal education? I have particularly in mind Russia as well as some other Eastern European countries where the collapse of former political systems have produced some sort of a void in the public and social space. Does it have anything in common with the situation in Brazil Marjetica just talked about, or with India and South America?

Dmitry Vilensky: The practices of self-education as self-organization are very important in the places where state institutions and particularly the university and academies are driven by a conservative discourse and become reactionary places par excellence. And their role is quite different from the centers of capitalism where you have to undermine and oppose the current wave of 'knowledge' capitalism where the whole society or at least metropolis

undergoes a process of 'becoming-university' but in a sort of corporate breeding of creative class. And we should be very careful with these differences.

Practices of self-education have been extraordinarily important in Russian cultural tradition. Nikolai Chernyshevsky's novel *Chto delat?* / *What is to be done?* (1863) offers a brilliant literary example. Often half-criminal and in opposition to official institutions of power, such confidential circles were able to formulate some of the most striking phenomena in Russian thought and culture. Notwithstanding their marginal position, they made an invaluable contribution to the historical victory over monstrous, repressive structures. Their experiences are getting new meaning and importance in the current historical moment. I would say that in the situation in Russia where official institutions become more and more oppressive, conservative, lacking even the capitalist inventive spirit, the role of small groups engaged in self-educational practice is not just very important, it is an issue of urgency and survival.

The problem with radical education is that we have to keep in mind the fact that Paulo Freire deliberately underpins "... the distinction between systematic education, which can only be changed by political power, and educational projects, which should be carried out with the oppressed in the process of organizing them" – the problem of the direct comparison between countries of peripheral capitalism is that they have different levels of popular mobilization and it influences a lot the way people are able to take matters into their hands.

The platform *Chto delat* / *What is to be done*, in the frame of which you are acting, opens a space between theory, art and activism; its newspaper called *Self-education* will be one of the projects for the coming documenta 12. If we return back to museums and art institutions, I wonder what you think about informal education within institutions, such as art museums and galleries? As you know, in recent years education has become an almost equal part of all the museum activities (which wasn't the case before) and also this year's biggest art event documenta made a special emphasis on education.

Dmitry Vilensky: I think that the issues of education in the framework of cultural institutions are very important, especially today. It is quite obvious that this tendency belongs to the traditional agenda of the Enlightenment project. At the moment the function of cultural institutions as the educators of public taste is in danger and under the threat of the cultural industry that becomes closer to populist entertainment than to enlightened education. But I think that the role of the so-called progressive institution should no longer be understood as a place where the simple idle curiosity of the bourgeois public finds its joyful satisfaction. It, on the contrary, should be a place where different people can actively participate in cultural production. Through the educational programs we should try to bring to institutions absolutely different publics – those who are on the side of the oppressed.

In 1998 Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* appeared forming a certain theoretical frame for a group of artists whose artworks concentrated on inter-personal relations and "needed the public to be completed" (Felix Gonzales-Torres). *Relational Aesthetics*, according to its author "judges artworks on the basis of inter-human relations which they represent, produce and prompt". Moreover, participatory or socially engaged art, which we are talking about here, brings about a situational understanding of culture, a situational understanding of global society. Its aim is not to produce an art work for the audience to complete but rather to produce a situation. In this situation, which favours collective process rather than an individual experience, the artist is only one of the participants and the responsibility for the outcome, the authorship, is shared. Claire Bishop, a London-based art critic, finds this "democracy" problematic, claiming that the aesthetic effect of the work suffers if it is not the responsibility and product of the idea of (one) artist. She argues that in socially engaged art "the aesthetic is being sacrificed on the altar of social change", which she explained by the thesis that art criticism evaluates "relational" art practices (socially engaged art, community based art, experimental communities, dialogue art, participatory interventions ...) according to its ethical values – good or bad model of collaborative practice? Since Marjetica Potrč and Dmitry Vilensky are both very much involved in the collaborative art practices and the Radical Education project explicitly fosters art as a collective experience, I asked them to comment on Bishop's argument.

Marjetica Potrč: Design is never neutral. An example from my practice, take the *Dry Toilet*, which I built together with Liyat Esakov, an Israeli architect, and La Vega community in Caracas, Venezuela in 2003. I must say that La Vega community discussed colour and the overall beauty of the *Dry Toilet*, along with function and ethics of the project. It is a myth that beauty is disconnected from function and ethics. I have reconstructed the *Dry Toilet* in various galleries and museums. There, the *Dry Toilet* became a case-study. It departs the 'real' to become both documentation and the imaginary of our society.

Bojana Piškur: I have been following the discussions about "relational practices" that you mention as well as Rancière's writings on politicized art whom Bishop takes as one of the reference points in her argument.

Relational practices for me are not just practices which include certain more or less successful collaborations but are beforehand also autonomous and concrete works of art. There is where the paradox occurs; how can these works be evaluated on the basis of good or bad collaboration if the critical apparatus is usually not even a part of their process making? The only ones who are “ethically” in a position to evaluate these works as such would be the very participants involved in the processes. My point is that not only the collaborative practices but also the critical apparatus and their tools need to be put into question and should – in this regard – be moved to a different field of thought, going beyond the art objects and processes.

An example comes from the study of systems – art system being one of them – where changes only appear when the members of a particular system have experiences outside the network of conversation, which is everything that cannot be explained from the inner logic of the system itself. Which leads precisely to the production of knowledge beyond what is presently known. This was a departure point for the Radical Education project.

Dmitry Vilensky: I share that concern of Claire Bishop. The aesthetic is a very important issue. But I think that it would be a big mistake if we ignored that inside those very experimental and relational social practices new forms of aesthetics have been developing. They are not so evident and perhaps are underdeveloped but we have to be very careful with them as in its own time avant-garde established close ties with the popular–folk culture. I think that right now we see a rise of very interesting forms that cannot fit even into a very inclusive idea of form and aesthetics that we inherited from modernist and post-modernist times. Something new is in the air and we should be very careful with it. But I am speaking from the position of the artists who somehow think that we should reject culturalization of many important social phenomena. I like very much a new tendency taking place: many social initiatives are refusing to be represented in the cultural sphere. Finally, they have understood that this representation could be of danger to their social meaning. And it also has been making a big confusion in the art world.

I think that art should make a responsible choice and try again to establish its own discipline. Of course I am not talking that art should be art for art's sake. If I am suggesting to re-think the idea of art's autonomy then I am thinking more about in the direction of *Autonomia Organizzata* (Organized Autonomy) established by the Italian worker movement. The ideas of a cultural autonomy, as political self-organization will help us to reclaim the power of art to impact life and politics. And this particular power comes through mediation of aesthetical form and methods.

But at the same time we do not have to be ashamed of pure agit-prop things. Look at the commercial galleries and festivals – they are up to 99% filled with objects and events that are just ads to capitalism. We need our own agitation. But let's call it agitation not art.

Notes:

1. Irit Rogoff, “Academy as Potentiality,” in *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.*, Revolver, 2006, p. 18.
2. Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents,” *Artforum International*, February 2006, pp. 178–183.

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