

Night School - Artforum.com / In Print



Liam Gillick and Night School core group members, New York, March 30, 2008. Photo: Rya Conrad-Bradshaw.

AN ANECDOTE FROM THE ART WORLD,

though it could as easily have been a hostage scene from the sausage factory in *Tout va bien*, left on the cutting-room floor: Attendees at a panel discussion in Berlin are pooled together in a room with a television, on which the proceedings are supposed to be displayed via a live feed. Due to a faulty setup, however, the

image appears without sound. Taking this glitch for an intentionally provocative gesture of exclusivity, the disgruntled would-be viewers decide to blockade the room in which the discussion is taking place—which happens to be a kitchen, repurposed for the evening by organizers mindful of the fact that kitchens tend to be places of hospitality and convivial interaction. Only after a good deal of time has passed is the crisis finally resolved and the inmates released, at which point the panelists pose a simple question to their captors: Why didn't you just knock on the door and ask to be let in?

This episode, which took place a couple of years ago as part of United Nations Plaza, a yearlong series of discussions and lectures organized by artist Anton Vidokle, speaks volumes about the anarchically dynamic atmosphere that permeated the program of which it was a part, where classroom conventions were regularly enacted through inversion, reinforcement, parody, substitution, and blurring. And yet the question posed by the hostages in this case opens onto an even broader one: How might one structure an institution that is designed to problematize the idea of the institution? Is such a thing even possible? This has been, in fact, the great whale Vidokle has been hunting for years now. United Nations Plaza was the progeny of the infamously annulled Manifesta 6 of 2006, conceived by Vidokle and cocurators Mai Abu ElDahab and Florian Waldvogel as an exhibition-as-art school that would explore the conflict in the divided city of Nicosia, Cyprus. Relocating the unrealized project to Berlin, Vidokle relaunched it under the United Nations Plaza rubric, establishing a headquarters in a nondescript building behind a chain supermarket and flanked by specters of the Eastern bloc. There, the legacy of the canceled Cyprus exhibition was reinscribed as a “productive failure,” a concept that became the program's organizing theme.

The project then bivouacked in New York and took the explicitly pedagogical moniker Night School, thus signaling that it would mime the structure of innumerable collective educational models (e.g., the Chautauqua movement, Black Mountain College, and Joseph Beuys's Free International University of Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research). Commencing in January 2008, Night School was an artist's project in the form of a freewheeling lyceum at the recently relocated New Museum's sleek home on the Bowery. I participated as a member of the core group: a constellation of twenty-eight artists, curators, critics, administrators, professors, gallerists, and students, along with a token investment banker. Linking most of us was a professed

dissatisfaction with the artistic sphere, to which we were all nevertheless committed, and a desire to form a cohesive community. In exchange for the opportunity to learn and to cultivate relationships—through conversations conducted after the public lectures, during private Sunday sessions in the museum’s fifth-floor classroom, or in watering holes scattered across the Lower East Side—we committed to a yearlong program of cultural labor. The lineup was diverse, featuring, among other contributions, Raqs Media Collective’s trio of presentations exploring the linked ideas of illegibility and darkness; Walid Raad’s careful parsings of Jalal Toufic’s poetic theorizations of the relationships among art, culture, and trauma; and Martha Rosler’s exhaustive history of video art as a medium initially resistant to commodification. Here the unifying theme, though sometimes only implicit, was production and dissemination—terms that have become central to, and interchangeable in, Vidokle’s own oeuvre.

But he was aware that such interests would be especially pressurized with the transposition from Berlin to New York. In a 2006 interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Vidokle described two chief problems he foresaw: the perennially distracted New York public, which presented “no real audience: there are mainly masses of entrepreneurs and consumers,” and the pitfalls involved in accepting museum sponsorship. A project organized by one of the Night School presenters offers an interesting parallel: When Whole Foods corporate policy prevented artist Natascha Sadr Haghghian from taking us on a field trip to one of the supermarket’s nearby outlets (where she had hoped to reveal the contradictions between theory and everyday life by conducting discussions with human rights scholar Thomas Keenan and sociologist Avery Gordon outside the museum auditorium’s hermetic isolation), she instead surreptitiously recorded conversations in the aisles and played them for the night school audience. There was a strongly implied analogy between the co-optation of a grassroots narrative by a megacorporation (the term *organic* having been more or less divested of its original meaning by Whole Foods and its industrialized ilk) and the New Museum’s trademarking of its radical beginnings even as it has capitulated to the megamuseum mentality.

At United Nations Plaza, there had seemed little danger of co-optation, though there were sometimes other kinds of peril. As the blockading incident may suggest, there was a porosity that allowed discourse and action, theory and praxis, to produce each other. And indeed, the mutually constitutive relationship between theory and praxis is crucial to Vidokle’s enterprise, which embraces the post-Fordist labor shift toward adaptability and interaction but runs counter to the pernicious professionalization of art. The acts of discourse formation and reception, and the examination of the role these play in constructing social groups and making knowledge possible, *are* the work of art, and spaces for display are reconstituted as primary sites of knowledge production.

Such initiatives are thus akin to a number of recent projects that have foregrounded discourse production as a means by which the agency of the art exhibition might be reclaimed. These initiatives are closely connected to the relational milieu of the ’90s; many of Vidokle’s collaborators, including artists Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija and curator Maria Lind, are of this cohort. In particular, Night School and projects like it are indebted to the mode of curatorial practice developed in that decade (with Lind a chief protagonist) that became known as the new institutionalism. Formats of mediation shifted: Catalogues became newsletters, gallery tours morphed into conversations, and openings, traditionally and paradoxically marking the closure of production, were reinvented as *Neustarts*. Following from a relational ethos that privileges social exchange over grandiose calls for social change, Night School and similar endeavors are founded on the idea that institutional

hierarchies, which typically relegate discursive activities to the periphery, are in need of leveling. Vidokle hinted at this in a 2007 interview in *Bidoun*: He recalled speaking at an art-fair panel discussion that “took place in this completely marginal space—a building that was literally under a staircase.” But just as the new institutionalism, conceived in European social democracies, has not always translated well in the US, Night School seemed liable to face some problems of context. Taken out from under the stairs, so to speak, and ensconced in its legitimizing new venue, would the colloquy turn into a kind of rigidified performance of itself?



Night School presentation, New Museum, New York. Rirkrit Tiravanija, September 25, 2008. Photo: Hatuey Ramos Fermin.

During the programmed events, presenters at Night School were dutifully loquacious, typically welcoming interruptions at any point. And yet, while beyond the auditorium’s four walls the core participants’ fraternal grouping engendered the type of ephemeral social exchanges that one might have hoped would naturally occur among friends at lecture’s close, the audiences at most events remained cautiously mute. As the organizers of the kitchen discussion in Berlin had

learned, welcoming does not necessarily equal facilitating. Occasionally the dearth of sound became audible, gaps in the discussion appearing like water around icebergs. It was impossible to forget that just outside the auditorium was the neon sign *Silence = Death*, which had made its debut in 1987 in the window of the New Museum’s original building, where it was a central element of ACT UP’s installation for Bill Olander’s watershed exhibition “Let the Record Show . . .” The sign, created by the ACT UP members who in 1988 would form the collective Gran Fury, instantly became an icon of aids activism and a key reference point in the ever-evolving discussion of politics and aesthetics. Twenty years later, it continued to urge politically engaged spectators to exchange and disseminate information in order to challenge the powers that be. Its steady pink glow tinted the well-trafficked vestibule where, on the first evening of Night School in January of last year, the expectant students waited for the program to commence, chatting among ourselves as if obeying the neon’s implicit exhortation. I came to think of this resuscitated agitprop emblem as the leitmotif of my experience, but at those moments when silence prevailed, its glow took on a baleful cast.

But then, as the dialectical antithesis to speech, silence does not necessarily indicate a deficiency of language or reason, nor must it imply the alienated passivity or suppression that Gran Fury enjoins us to reject. Illustrating this was Paul Chan, who, during the Q&A following his talk, responded with telling silence to an inquiry about what the audience member described as Chan’s tendency to separate the political and aesthetic realms. In a conversation with Rosler (published in 2006 as part of Art Press’s *Between Artists* series), Chan invoked satirist Karl Kraus: “Those who now have nothing to say because actions are speaking continue to talk. Let him who has something to say come forward and be silent.” Audience members were charged with the responsibility of activating spectatorship by cultivating such productive modes of silence, yet in the darkened auditorium it was difficult to distinguish engaged participants, those who were letting actions speak, from

passive consumers of knowledge. The nebulous silence of the Night School audience could have been active contemplation or devalued leisure or anything in between.

Evaluating the project from a pedagogical standpoint, its successes outweigh its failures. Many of us in the core group did amass knowledge. We also formed professional connections and social bonds, as most of us had sought to do, although the realities of dwindling attendance and spotty follow-through on endeavors like a group publication and a shared Gmail account tempered early expectations with an awareness that the kind of unity we might initially have hoped for was perhaps impossible. In addition, we gained career competencies, but this criterion is a trickier one, for it engages the issue of the very professionalization that Night School aimed to resist. Here I would say that, in contrast to proliferating MFA and doctorate-level art programs, Night School offered what might be considered an ethical alternative model, giving the participants a sense of how to maintain autonomy while navigating the contemporary art world's choppy waters.

Over and above all this, however, are broader considerations. Though not openly questioned by the core group for fear of looking a gift horse in the mouth, the host institution's viability as the fulcrum of a nonhierarchical, centerless system—as it purports to be, per its ongoing curatorial program Museum as Hub—was on many of our minds. The ease of critique within the museum setting smacked of an indulgent pseudo-rebellion; for many of us, the palpable suspicion of being leveraged as cultural capital undermined the potency of the project. It takes more than a semblance of nondetermined exchange to restore faith in rational discourse and to eclipse modernist avant-garde models that rely on a rhetoric of shock and disruption. And while there are obvious benefits to funding and legitimation, the choice to operate under the New Museum's auspices was puzzling, considering Vidokle's particular brand of operational autonomy. The art project—as-company that he founded in 1999 and runs with Julieta Aranda, e-flux, is most visible in its e-mail news service that disseminates curated art-related press releases; revenues from this service fund the collectively authored projects that constitute the bulk of e-flux's critical engagements. E-flux's administrative principle enables a fiscally autonomous enterprise that is a constellation of forms such as art collective, archive, art journal, not-for-profit, and alternative art space. On the continuum of the critique of institutions, this entrepreneurial act falls somewhere between Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's "aesthetics of administration" and Hans Haacke's visualization of the intangible forces that dominate social spaces. E-flux has abolished dependency on traditional frameworks while embodying the shift in institutional critique toward a consideration of interpersonal relations; as Andrea Fraser put it in this magazine in September 2005, the institution "is also internalized and embodied in people."

Transplanting such self-organized discursive collectives to the museum threatens to alter their operational cadences. Ideally, power would shift in these private institutions of critique, and expanded "publics" would be addressed. But the danger is that dissent and contention will fall away in favor of unity-seeking discourse in a hermetic quasi multiplicity. Brian Holmes, whose writings were referenced a number of times at Night School, proposes in a 2006 essay touching on University College London's Panopticon Museum that "the laboratory-museum could well serve as an exemplary device of power, precisely to the extent that it achieves a multiple channelling of that creative energy into the controlled circuits of the neoliberal economy." As the seminars progressed, I found my skepticism about Night School's emancipatory possibilities waning, recollecting the early lesson of productive failure: One should aim high and then accept, in actuality, that it was enough to do a bit better. Nevertheless, Holmes's point is worth enunciating. Inducing speech can be just as dangerous as any

silence.

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