

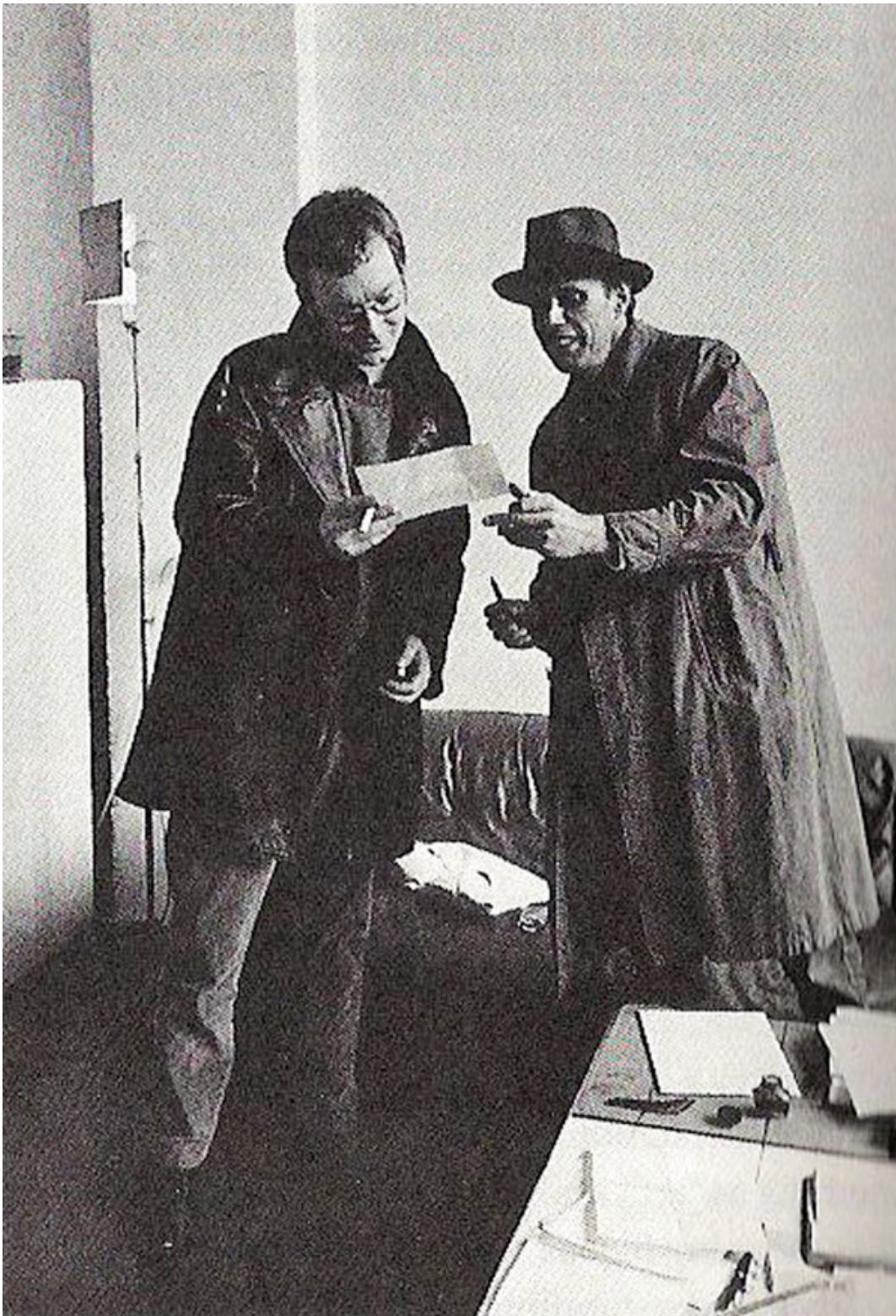
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Joseph Beuys and Friedrich Heubach, chief editor of 70s German art journal "Interfunktionen". Image from the book "Behind the Facts. Interfunktionen 1968–1975", Ediciones Poligrafa, Barcelona, 2004.

Critical Mess: On the Ruins of The Museum's Research Departments

by Dieter Roelstraete

Art school has suddenly become cool. Dieter Roelstraete investigates the educational turn that the art system has taken, with a wealth of seminars, workshops, and dedicated exhibitions and literature. From the academic world, under the aegis of the Bologna Process, to seminars on the aesthetics of resistance at the Workers Punk Art School in Berlin, we see the discursive realm expanding while the sphere of museums and criticism is in crisis. With the growing awareness that artistic training is as much part of the problem as it is part of the solution.

For a number of years now the art world has witnessed a steadily increased interest in the once-peripheral topic, at least from a curatorial point of view, of art education: the art school, which did not feature very prominently as an artistic concern – let alone a theme, method or even a form – in much of the art of the seventies, eighties and nineties, has been the subject of much curating, conference-organizing, publishing, and (not surprisingly, given our culture's passion for the pathos of autoreflexivity and self-referentiality) teaching in recent years, and the reanimation of not just a few art careers long deemed lost in the mists of time has been closely connected with what has indeed been called an “educational turn” in art. So, whereas in 2007, Frankfurt's former Städelschule director Daniel Birnbaum could still observe – in an article published in *Artforum* – that “words such as school and academy rarely spark enthusiasm in progressive circles,” much of that sought-after enthusiasm is now likely to be guaranteed by the mere mention, no matter how perfunctory, of the words “academy”, “education” or “school” (the language of “reading groups,” “seminars” and “workshops” obviously belongs to the same sphere). There have been exhibitions such as “Academy: Learning from Art/Learning from the Museum” and projects like Stephan Dilleuth's *The Academy and the Corporate Public*; books titled *Art School: Propositions for the 21st Century* (edited by Steven Henry Madoff); *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School: The Artist, the PhD and the Academy* (edited by Brad Buckley and John Conomos) and *Curating and the Educational Turn* (edited by Paul O'Neill); and conferences, events or related publications such as *Rethinking Arts Education for the 21st Century*; *Notes for an Art School*; *You talkin' to me? Why art is turning to education*; *A Portrait of the Artist as a Researcher*; *Transpedagogy: Contemporary Art and the Vehicles of Education*; *Deschooling Society*; and *Monte Verità or the Academy as a Model for 'Being in the World'* – indeed, I have long thought it telling that precisely at the height of this feverish self-reflexive activity in 2006, when even Frieze decided to put the question called “Art Schools Then and Now” on its cover, Terry Zwigoff should have released an otherwise utterly forgettable film titled *Art School Confidential*. The crucial point of reference in this expanding discursive landscape – which of course also includes artist initiatives like Piero Golia's Mountain School of Arts in Los Angeles, or the Workers Punk Art School in Berlin – has remained, and will probably remain, the failed attempt of Manifesta 6, also in 2006, to become an art school rather than just another biennial on the fringes of a thoroughly biennial-saturated continent, and it is significant that the once-adventurous Manifesta program (deemed influential enough to give its name to a decade, as a book titled *The Manifesta Decade* attested in that very same year) seems to have whittled down to the run-of-the-mill business of producing needlessly inflated group shows much like everyone else, while the fall-out of Manifesta 6's shock cancellation produced more compelling signal projects such as *United Nations Plaza* and *The Building*.



Joseph Beuys and Friedrich Heubach, chief editor of 70s German art journal "Interfunktionen". Image from the book "Behind the Facts. Interfunktionen 1968–1975", Ediciones Poligrafica, Barcelona, 2004.

Hovering above many such manifestations of the (European) art world's commendable desire to both radically rethink the twinned topics of learning and teaching art as well as recast the art world's structural relationship with the academy (in both senses of the word), is of course that chimerical entity which has since become known, with characteristically enigmatic brevity, as the Bologna Process – the Janus-faced ghost of “artistic research” and “knowledge production”. The undiminished topicality of the questions raised by these specters is attested by the recent publication of a “Bologna”-themed special issue of the online e-flux journal, guest edited by Irit Rogoff, with which the editors of e-flux journal (one of whom, Anton Vidokle, co-authored the script for Manifesta 6's proposed art school) rightly seek to counter the art world's increasing tendency to absorb the aforementioned “educational turn” as a mere “mannerist curiosity” – a tiresome curatorial ruse. On a slightly less enlightened note, some 80plus art education professionals gathered at the Hochschule der Künste in Bern in the beginning of March this year to chart the general direction of the newly founded Journal for Artistic Research, the first issue of which still has to see the light of day. The title of the journal begs the question (aside from the obvious one which asks of us whether we really need another journal) whether there really exist artistic practices that do not entail artistic research: isn't a journal for artistic research just another art journal? Isn't all art based on “artistic

research”? So it looks like artistic research and knowledge production, as the easily standardized means and ends of an art education system forced into more and more economic streamlining – for that, for better or worse, is what the Bologna Process essentially boils down to – , will remain “buzz words” for a long time to come, demonstrating that the art world’s proverbial research-and-development departments may turn out to be much more crisis-and-cutback-proof than common sense may at first seem to suggest: whenever a recession undermines the health of the job market, people either go back to school, or choose to extend their schooling, and this, among other places, is precisely where the proliferation of artistic research programs in art schools and universities around the world comes into play: “artistic research” is precisely that unlikely magical formula that will keep funds flowing – for now.



Jörg Immendorff, *Hier und jetzt: Das tun, was zu tun ist. Materialien zur Diskussion: Kunst im politischen Kampf. Auf welcher Seite stehst Du, Kulturschaffender?*, König, 1973

Amid all this – i.e. the bewildering flowering of artistic research programs, precisely now, in this hour of so-called “crisis” – two institutions appear to be suffering in silence, and this may at first glance seem as counterintuitive as the continued robustness of the financial health of the institution of artistic research as such: the museum and art criticism. Firstly, one of the problems of the question of artistic research as it is currently being articulated within the sphere of higher education is that museums, whose institutional origins are of course primarily educational, appear to have been largely left out of this very debate, thus widening an already existing chasm between the spaces of art’s conception, conceptualization and production on the one hand, and the spaces of exhibition and presentation on the other – and this trend (i.e. the ruination of the museum’s research function) obviously plays a role of some significance in the erosion of the time-honored notion that the museum not only belongs to, but also paradigmatically and programmatically represents the public sphere as a site of dialogical, if not dialectical exchange, as well as in the erosion of the public sphere proper, in what George Lukacs has called the “objective disappearance of the ‘great world’”. In this sense, the paradoxical European phenomenon of diminishing public funds for public art institutions and the stabilization of (or relative increase in) public funds for artistic research programs in art schools and universities could be said to replicate a development that has long been underway in the American museum landscape, but which only recently appeared to culminate in two symbolic, signal events – the appointment of Jeffrey Deitch as the new director of LA MOCA on the one hand, and Dakis Joannou’s takeover of New York’s New Museum exhibition program on the other. Indeed, with the enterprise of artistic research anxiously accelerating its retreat to the comfort zones of a modest financial security safeguarded by specialized research institutions – their very specialization already symbolic of their distance from something akin to a public sphere – it is perhaps understandable (though not necessarily permissible) that contemporary art museums should have deserted their traditional roles as sites of knowledge production and dissemination so as to better align themselves with the varying business models of the entertainment industry instead. And to think that schools, research institutions and academies have long shown to be much more vulnerable to the pressures of privatization than museums even...

*The Mountain School of Arts - Dan Graham**Lecture in the Mountain Bar, 2010.*

Artistic research and knowledge production: for much of the last decade, this twinned concept has preferred to manifest itself primarily in the guise of a true inflation of the discursive realm, in the proliferation of artist talks, conversations (the “educational” turn is a “conversational” turn), panel discussions, salons – and in a hypertrophy of writing itself of course: not so much criticism, tellingly (and this is why I believe art criticism is in a state of crisis), as constant self-invention and self-mystification – as in: talking about talking, writing about writing, researching research. Much of this frenzied discursive activity was clearly dependent on the generosity, whether financial, infrastructural of merely symbolic, of public institutions, and sometimes even of private institutions or conglomerates of private businesses – the defining example remains the sudden vogue for panel talks afflicting even art fairs in the early noughties – whose sense of adventure and experimentation had either been determined or made possible by the relative comforts of the boom era. With most of the same public institutions now suffering the consequences of the global financial market’s recent upheavals – for the real crisis itself is probably yet to come – it remains to be seen whether the discursive regime which has been such a defining feature, along with Damien Hirst’s diamond-studded skull (one day we will really understand the silence of the skull and the global chatter of art speak to be no more than different sides of the same coin), of the art of the last decade will be able to secure its survival and stay in place: museums, as we have seen, are revising their priorities, and art schools and universities are as much a part of the problem as they are a part of the solution. Perhaps art criticism, so oddly sidelined for much of the decade under discussion – this too has to do with the silence of Hirst’s skull and the chatter of the panels, on art fairs and during biennials – may have a role to play in the urgent untangling of this critical mess; it certainly performs a function of publicness (“publicity”) that has become hard to come by in vast swathes of the art world. Art criticism can help to keep that ‘open’ which the proverbial closing down of so many museums threatens to hide from view: those processes of artistic research and knowledge production that cannot simply be called the property of the institution of art education alone – perhaps art criticism can even help to take art back from the educatoriat.

NOTES

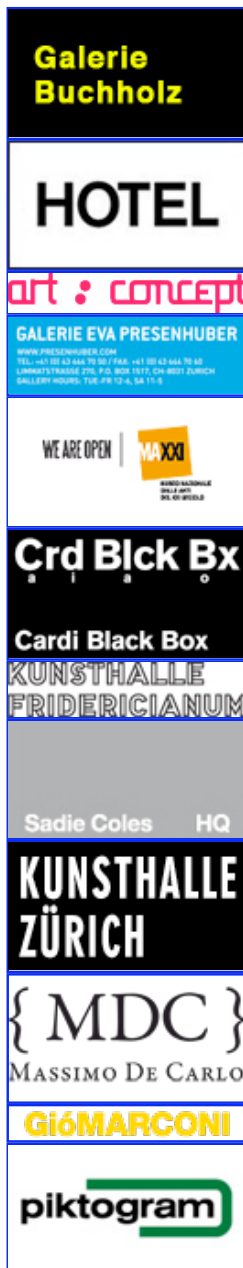
1. Cfr. the opening lines of Irit Rogoff’s essay “Turning”, published in e-flux journal #0, November 2008: “We have recently heard much about the “educational turn in curating” among several other “educational turns” affecting cultural practices around us”. See <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/18>. This educational turn does not only concern curating, but also art making and art writing – and finally (this is not as obvious as one would think or hope it to be) also art education itself.

2. Although the 29 signatories of the Bologna Declaration – a statement of intent, it is worth recalling here, rather than *dura lex* – emphatically stated as their aim to “create convergences” rather than clear the “path towards the ‘standardisation’ or ‘uniformisation’ of European higher education”, the actual rhetoric is undeniably one of streamlining: “the adoption of a common framework of readable and comparable degrees” and “the introduction of undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all countries, with first degrees no shorter than 3 years and relevant to the labour market” with an eye on “achieve greater compatibility and comparability in the systems of higher education” to “ensure that the European higher education system acquires a worldwide degree of attractiveness equal to [Europe’s] extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions.” The Bologna Declaration can be read online at ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf. My colleague, compatriot and namesake Dieter Lesage has published extensively on this issue, and many of the thoughts formulated in this piece have benefitted from our ongoing conversation.



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