

[Databases selected:](#) Multiple databases...

The Art of Education

Daniel Birnbaum. *Artforum*. New York: Summer 2007. Vol. 45, Iss. 10; pg. 474, 4 pgs

Abstract (Summary)

The hybridity that arises through the proximity of education, production, and display has allowed it to present publicly (in the Portikus) the results of any number of collective productions instigated at the school both by teachers and visiting artists: from the renderings by students of Yoko Ono's almost haikuliike "instruction pieces" to their staging of a vast cosmology with Matthew Ritchie; from Tiravanija, artist Pierre Huyghe, and art historian Pamela M. Lee's installation of a Gordon Matta-Clark show behind a wall built from a few hundred large loaves of bread baked by students in the Stadelsschule's cooking class to John Bock's collision of disciplines, wherein he screened a new film onto a baroque structure designed by architect Ben van Berkel and built in a few weeks by his class. The curators did publish a book, however-Notes for an Art School (2006)-in which they spell out some of their arguments.

Full Text (3363 words)

Copyright *Artforum Inc.* Summer 2007

1. "Ignorance is a treasure of infinite price" (Paul Valéry). Most of us have a lot to unlearn.
2. Key artists who are also great teachers are rare. Find them, and much else will follow. They don't need to agree on anything and should represent only themselves.
3. Wonderful things can happen between disciplines, but you don't need to tear down the walls. There are doors. (Just leave them unlocked.)
4. Something happens to a thing when it is displayed. An art school is not an exhibition, but students should be close to exhibitions.
5. Food can be as important as philosophy; the best teaching may happen during meals. (A good canteen is helpful.)
6. Money is not evil, but don't forget: There are much more exciting things than a sold work of art. Is the ideal school a monastery or a bazaar? Yes.
7. There is never just one way to do art. John Baldessari and Thomas Bayle (my heroes) have shown this in their teaching, and their students around the world keep proving it. ("Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," Wittgenstein said, but what cannot be said can be shown. Just do it!)

SEVEN YEARS AGO I was appointed dean, or rather Rektor (a German title I like more because of its archaic and, I admit, authoritarian ring), of an art school in Frankfurt: the Stadelsschule. I never composed a statement of intent or a master plan to get this position, but I was nevertheless given the job, I guess because I had done things-whether as a curator or as a critic-that seemed relevant to art education. No one asked me then what I thought the role of an art school should be-which was good, because I didn't know. My fancy today would be to write a "retroactive manifesto," to use Rem Koolhaas's term. After all, according to the occult teachings of Rudolf Steiner, life is structured in seven-year cycles, and so this is perhaps an appropriate moment to look back. But the seven brief notes above are the sole outcome of my efforts thus far-a meager result after all these years, I know, and not much of a program.

So I'll start somewhere else. The first new teacher I invited to the Stadelsschule was Rirkrit Tiravanija. Over the course of two years, 2001 and 2002, he did three things: He taught at the school (which in Tiravanija's case means that he met with students, cooked, ate, and talked); he put on a show at the school's gallery, the Portikus, centering the exhibition around a wooden platform (on which people met, cooked, ate, and talked); and, in the summer, he initiated (together with artist Dirk Fleischmann and curator Jochen Volz) a large workshop that turned the whole school into a kind of inn, or "Giisthof," (TM) as the event was called. Together with students from the Stadelsschule, hundreds of artists and students from other schools were invited to stay in our studios; we all met, cooked, ate, and talked for an entire week.

Did Tiravanija turn the entire school into a work of art? That is probably how some people saw it-not merely because claiming the production site itself as a work of art is the logical consequence of many recent developments in contemporary art but because "Giisthof" seems to represent the essence of that art which Nicolas Bourriaud christened "relational aesthetics" in the 1990s. For Tiravanija and other "relational" artists Bourriaud discusses, social exchange is not just a side effect or a backdrop but the very core of an artwork, a standard by which the art school-where a certain kind of group dynamic is bound to occur, and where collaborative modes of production are near at hand-would seem a place uniquely suited to their endeavors.

But perhaps "Giisthof," rather than being a work of art itself, merely highlighted what was already there in the school and made more conspicuous the give-and-take that constitutes the basis of the educational situation. A similar project involving many of the same people was presented as an exhibition at the 2003 Venice Biennale ("Utopia Station," organized by Tiravanija with curators Molly Nesbit and Hans-Ulrich Obrist) and seemed very different in its effect. At "Giisthof," everybody present was part of the gig; "Utopia Station," by contrast, introduced collective exchange and interactivity into a biennial where these things still appear a bit alien. To look at the school as a kind of exhibition and at the activities going on in the school as art is, then, only one of the possible ways of understanding the situation, and not always the most appealing. In spite of today's fetishistic will toward commodification, we should still accept the existence of things that cannot be objectified in terms of display-for instance, the act of education itself. The primary purpose of an art school remains to educate students, not to put them-or itself-on display.

In this context, investigations into the status of both art and education and the negotiation of the nexus between them are worth considering further-and one certainly lies that opportunity at an institution such as the Stadelsschule, which is an art school with a kitchen attached. The hybridity that arises through the proximity of education, production, and display has allowed it to present publicly (in the Portikus) the results of any number of collective productions instigated at the school both by teachers and visiting artists: from the renderings by students of Yoko Ono's almost haikuliike "instruction pieces" to their staging of a vast cosmology with Matthew Ritchie; from Tiravanija, artist Pierre Huyghe, and art historian Pamela M. Lee's installation of a Gordon Matta-Clark show behind a wall built from a few hundred large loaves of bread baked by students in the Stadelsschule's cooking class to John Bock's collision of disciplines, wherein he screened a new film onto a baroque structure designed by architect Ben van Berkel and built in a few weeks by his class.

In order to gain some perspective on this question of the educational institution's relationship to art, however, we would do well to go back to Thierry de Duve's essay "When Form Has Become Attitude-And Beyond," which was written in 1993, roughly the same moment that relational art practices were coming into being. In de Duve's analysis, the contemporary art school is a debased successor to the modernist model, which emphasized creativity (rather than talent, as had been typical of the earlier educational approach), the qualities inherent in a medium (rather than artistic techniques), and invention (rather than imitation). In the modern art school, de Duve argues, these concepts have in turn been replaced-and hollowed out-by theory-based programs stressing "attitude," practice, and deconstruction. "What I believe is apparently organizing the most advanced art schools," he writes, "is . . . the disenchanting, perhaps nihilistic, after-image of the old Bauhaus paradigm." Although he concedes that the organizing principles of the modern art school can produce "strong" art, he claims they are sterile for the teaching of art.

In fact, the Stadelsschule is probably a paradigmatic case showing where a program based on practice and "attitude" ends up. (The dominance of "deconstruction" has seemingly abated, at least to some extent, since de Duve wrote his piece.) In recent times the Stadelsschule faculty has included a number of artists who question their medium from within: filmmakers who make no films, architects who don't build, painters who question the feasibility of painting. And yet it is impossible to reduce the teaching to any kind of doctrine, because the institution has always been centered on the input of a small number of strong teachers, each with different, and sometimes opposing, views-from Hermann Nitsch, Peter Cook, and Thomas Bayle in the recent past, to Simon Starling, Isabelle Dreyer, Wolfgang Tillmans, Michael Krebber, and a few others today. A successful art school must involve important artists, as Baldessari insists. A great faculty attracts interesting students, who teach one another. It's about participating in a collective sphere of challenging and critical exchange, rather than being taught specific techniques.

Tobias Rehberger, our vice director, emphasizes the importance of removing the kitsch and the clichés about art and about the role of the artist as a necessary first step, followed by something constructive that is much harder to specify: "It's not as if you hammer at them and leave them to pick up the pieces themselves,

because this is still a school and a protective space." (This latter point is important to remember: It's exactly what is sacrificed the moment the school is treated as an exhibition or an artwork.) But what happens after the kitsch is removed? Rehberger suggests telling students, "You have to surprise me. You have to go beyond what I'm telling you. Otherwise you can only reach my level and that's not very interesting because you're already there." How is this step possible? The answer may sound too simple: "If you're able to get rid of the kitsch you're carrying around, then you almost automatically get there." This is probably largely the kind of optimism that is necessary for anyone who works in education, but it is also, it turns out, a way of teaching that insists on the necessity of an individual cure.

Indeed, the tools of kitsch removal vary radically. When the late Jason Rhoades—the great virtuoso of exaggeration, someone who always wanted to push things to the extreme—was a visiting artist at the Stadelsschule, he put the process itself on view. For *Costner Complex (Perfect Process)*, 2001, his installation at the Portikus, he turned the gallery into a production plant for salad dressing, which was first prepared in backbreaking labor by students and then subjected to actor Kevin Costner's "essence" in the "KC Centrifuge," which consisted of a bank of video monitors showing all the films in which he performs. What Rhoades was after in this work was a kind of collective bliss, a moment when everyone worked in "perfect harmony," performing "smoothly and efficiently, having surrendered to the task at hand," as he wrote in the catalogue. "It is not meant to be viewed as an object, a performance or even a goal-oriented activity, but simply as a perfect process," he stated. Although I'm sure not all the students who participated felt the same way, the work certainly demonstrated an idealism about what is possible within the context of a school (especially if one is not above giving a few bribes where necessary).

Some kinds of art are only possible at art schools, and this is nothing new. The most famous example is probably *Still & Chew/Art and Culture*, 1966-67, for which John Latham and his student Barry Flanagan organized a party at which guests chewed up pages from the library copy of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London. De Duve cites this happening as a symbolic marker of the radical redirection of the art school away from formalism and modernism toward innovation and subversion. Latham was fired after he attempted to return a liquid made of the fermented paper and saliva to the library in place of the book; today, de Duve claims, an artist "could do the same performance with the principal's blessing, and the librarian wouldn't even bother to reorder *Art and Culture*."

Another case in point makes clear just how different today's institutions have become. In 1968, Michael Ballhaus, who worked with Rainer Werner Fassbinder and, later, with Martin Scorsese, conducted a camera seminar at the Deutsche Film-und-Fernsehakademie Berlin. As part of the seminar, Gerd Conradt filmed other students of the academy running through the streets of Berlin with a large red flag, which was passed from one runner to the next, like a baton in a relay race. The film ends with the last runner, Holger Meins (who would a few years later become feared across Europe as one of the key members of the RAF terrorist group), disappearing into City Hall only to reappear on the balcony waving the flag. One of the organizers of this demonstration was Otto Gmelin, a radical filmmaker who also taught at the school—and even ran twice himself. As a result of the illegal intrusion into City Hall, the entire group of students was thrown out of the school, and Gmelin resigned in solidarity. More than three decades later, Swedish artist and teacher Felix Gmelin, Otto's son, restaged the relay race with his students in Stockholm. His *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II (Color Test: The Red Flag II)*, 2002, juxtaposes the original film with footage of the latter-day reenactment, again a kind of collaboration—explicit in the relay-race form—that was possible by virtue of the unique social situation within an art school. As this work was in part intended to demonstrate, albeit in far broader political, historical, and cultural contexts, times have changed: Felix Gmelin remains a popular professor, whose work was included in the 2003 Venice Biennale before ending up—where else?—in a major museum collection.

Words such as school and academy have rarely sparked enthusiasm in progressive circles, however. Asked if the Black Mountain College was to be an art school, its cofounder John Andrew Rice replied, "God, no. That's the last thing I want. Schools are the most awful places in the world." And, echoing generations of avant-garde artists eager to express their contempt for art schools as the paradigmatic symbol of the conservatism of the cultural establishment, Gerhard Richter in 1983 asserted that "the most gruesome aspect of our artistic misery is to be found in the so-called art academies. . . . The word academy," he continued, "merely serves to deceive ministries, local governments and parents, and in the name of the academy young students are deformed and misshaped."

But attitudes change, and of course there are now many different kinds of activities happening at art schools as well as many different kinds of places calling themselves art schools. Last year, I witnessed an unconventional example—not of an art school as such but of an excellent educational model—at Olafur Eliasson's studio in Berlin. In his pleasant and not too orderly garden, a group of young artists and architects were building an incredibly complex geometric structure of wood and metal. Indoors, another group was producing drawings on computers, while yet others were researching vibrations and waves in physics, optics, and immunology. The day before, a symposium had taken place in the garden involving an Icelandic violin maker, various artists and writers, and Sanford Ksvinter, the visionary American architectural theorist. As well as being a kind of factory where works are produced for exhibitions across the globe, then, Eliasson's studio is a laboratory where all kinds of technologies and devices are tested just out of curiosity, and where different disciplines enter into a productive dialogue. A number of young artists have worked for Eliasson; some, such as Jeppe Hein and Tonia Saraceno, have gone on to become prominent in their own right. The place appears to me to be an unusually inspiring educational site. For many, what it offers is a modern version of an old-fashioned apprenticeship, falling somewhere between the research period of the art school and the production period of the art career. Eliasson has, it seems, used his own financial success within the market to create a temporary oasis whose values are antithetical to it—a privileged zone of noninstrumentalized experimentation and research.

A renewed interest in the theory and practice of art education has recently become evident. Among many other examples, the Anaphiel Foundation has been organizing a series of symposia, with the title "An Arts School for the 21st Century," dedicated to finding out what the future of art education should be: what curriculum would be the best, what the teachers should be like, what the most suitable architecture, equipment, and workshops would be, and so on. In general, however, it is the experimental school that seems to trigger the most art world excitement. Historical precedents—from the Bauhaus and other modernist examples to Ponrus Hultén and Daniel Buren's *Institut des Hautes Études en Art Plastique* in Paris or Cedric Price's visionary proposal in 1963 to establish a mobile school housed in train carriages running on disused railway tracks linking the British pottery towns of Staffordshire—are being dug out of the archives and seem to gain new luster. There have been a number of more recent, if short-lived, alternatives to the traditional academies, which have often been artists' initiatives or even curatorial projects.

Indeed, the most obvious example of the school's new status has been in the growing appeal of the art school as an exhibition model. A current example, *United Nations Plaza*, is a yearlong "exhibition as school," organized by Anton Vidokle in Berlin. It is similar in spirit to the planned sixth installment of *Manifesta*, the nomadic European biennial, which was similarly intended, on a far larger scale, to take the form of a kind of school, and which was supposed to take place in Cyprus last year, but was canceled when local Cypriot politics proved too complicated. The curators did publish a book, however—*Notes for an Art School (2006)*—in which they spell out some of their arguments. According to Mai Abu Eidahab, one of the show's organizers, all the questions normally asked of biennials—"How many tickets sold? How many new works produced? How many reviews? How many international guests?"—take for granted a logic that is in opposition to real innovation. "In order to be successful," Eidahab claims, "the project must fail by the existing standards of the exhibition industry." Resisting the language of bureaucrats and marketing people she writes, "Cultural production must maintain and defend its autonomy as a space where the freedom to experiment, to negotiate ideological positions and to fail are not only accepted, but defining." Where do we find such spaces of free experimentation today? Certainly not in the corporate museum, at the art fair, or on the global circuit of blockbuster shows expected to attract mass audiences. So, Eidahab argues, a new philosophy—one based on an educational model—is required.

Art schools promise things that other art-world institutions increasingly lack, which has made them a kind of screen for projections and fantasies. The attraction of the school echoes that of artistic processes that produce nothing concrete (the exchange of ideas, the trial and error of experimentation). The hunger for alternatives is getting stronger in reaction to an ever more powerful art market and its increasing demand for commodities. Indeed, it often seems that the educational sphere is one of the few zones where experimentation is still possible. I have some reservations about crossbreeding the art school with the exhibition format, however: The school cannot be the solution to so many problems, and I am anxious as to what would happen to the art school once it too is packaged and displayed.

This is not to suggest that the art school should turn itself into a monastery that protects students from the evil forces outside. The pressures of the outside world also bear within the school; moreover, the idea of an inside and an outside is itself probably too simplistic. What is "out there" is in fact of great interest—not least for pedagogical purposes. It's a question of perspective, rather than of contents. Students are torn between incompatible worlds, whether they realize it or not. We live in an asynchronic moment when the old academy, the modernist model, and the "advanced art school" as described by de Duve live side by side in a world increasingly driven by market interests. We should remember that the school is a temporary space, intended to give young artists the theoretical and practical tools they need to navigate an ever-changing now themselves. In the end, that capacity to navigate on one's own is what it's all about. Really, nothing else matters. Perhaps the school can be a ladder: one that is thrown away once one has climbed it.

[Sidebar]

In spite of today's fetishistic will toward commodification, we should still accept the existence of things that cannot be objectified in terms of display—for instance, the act of education itself.

[Author Affiliation]

DANIEL BIRNBAUM IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.

Indexing (document details)

Subjects: Students, Art markets, Art education, Art exhibits

Author(s): Daniel Birnbaum

Author Affiliation: DANIEL BIRNBAUM IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.

Document types: Commentary

Document features: Photographs

Publication title: Artforum. New York: Summer 2007. Vol. 45, Iss. 10; pg. 474, 4 pgs

Source type: Periodical

ISSN: 10867058

ProQuest document ID: 1295087231

Text Word Count 3363

Document URL: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?did=1295087231&sid=2&Fmt=3&clientId=1917&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

Copyright © 2010 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

