

Notes for an Art School

Julie Ault & Martin Beck

Drawing Out & Leading Forth

In the recently published *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Genevieve Lloyd describes the meaning of education as situated between the two strands of the word's Latin roots: education as 'drawing out' of qualities already inherent in an individual; and, secondly, as a 'leading forth', which is understood as a form of guiding individuals into certain social contexts.¹ In the first framework, education has an enabling role, that of helping individuals to realise and fully utilise potentials that are thought to be already inherent in them. The second framework situates education in a larger political field, mediating between the notion of individuality and the social body that an individual is always part of: 'Thinking of education as a 'drawing out' of what is rightfully our own can encourage us to think of its benefits as ultimately an individual and private matter, while the 'leading forth' idea encourages concern with the more collective, social dimensions of the process.'² Although describing discordant meanings of education, these two concepts are not mutually exclusive. 'Leading forth' is also partly based on the idea of inherent qualities: 'We can be "led forth" by having our inner qualities or characters "drawn out."³

Individuality and Social Practice

In the arena of art education, these two operations or goals are at the heart of a conflict that haunts numerous art schools in their quest for a contemporary learning environment. This conflict has philosophical, structural and practical consequences.

Distinct from fields of study that utilise the banking method whereby information is deposited into students, art education has largely been conceived as a framework within which inherent qualities of an individual are expressed, encouraged and developed—or, one might say, drawn out. Terms such as 'individuality', 'freethinking' and 'autonomy' remain persistent characterisations of art-making. While striving for independent thinking is in many ways productive and positive, in reality, artistic production is both a social process and a cultural practice, embedded into particular histories and contexts.

Though contested, the art school prototype that holds individuality as its ideology is still widely in use. However, conceptions of art and artist as well as art education have variously transformed during the latter half of the twentieth century. Anti-domination movements have provided theoretical and practical frameworks for making non-hierarchical social structures, including educational ones. In this light, education might be considered a contextual, dynamic, and social process, aiming at the ongoing development of critical consciousness for the purpose of engendering cultural and social agency as guiding principles. Paolo Freire and bell hooks, among others, have theorised such empowering pedagogical processes.⁴

Master and Apprentice

The long-established model of art education is exemplified, both practically and ideologically, by the master-apprentice relationship. In this set-up, students' worthiness to study or gain admittance is measured according to demonstrated talent and the requisite wide-eyed near-religious belief in *being an artist*. Once immersed into such programmes, disappointment and frustration can rapidly set in, while waiting for inspiration that does not come (where should it come from?) and while feeling powerless to practise in an accomplished manner. How could one prove that she is an artist? How to even know? Do the professors

know, or do they more often than not simply assist students in feeling they are *onto something*. Perhaps the enterprise is one of mutual indulgence and reproduction?

Surprisingly, North American art programmes designed in the 1960s and 1970s that proclaimed reform and sought to democratise educational structures and widen the discourse of art beyond tradition have largely succumbed to newer versions of the master-apprentice structure. Although a range of missions and specificities or areas of expertise are purported to define particular institutions and art departments, most prominent art schools function on a business model within which student recruitment is based (via their art careers) on the marquee appeal of teachers who promise new generations of viable careers on the horizon, once the school's stamp of approval has been earned in the form of a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree. Such developments are symptomatic of American market culture wherein education is a commodity that costs money, sometimes a great deal of money, and is believed to translate into the potential to make a great deal of money.

While American art schools continue to up the financial ante and traffic in increasingly raw marketing processes of selling education, many European art academies have been immersed in differently textured states of transition in recent years as constituencies grapple with contemporising institutional structures and integrating more recent modes and models into their curricula. One of the conflicts being played out in a number of central European art academies with long histories is the transition from the historical *Meisterschule* principle, a master-apprentice model, to a more topically oriented model of study with an emphasis on discourse and critical reflection.

Topicality and Discursivity

The concept of an art school structured along not just one, but a multitude of models, topics and discourses that are communicated in seminar, lecture and visiting artist formats as well as developed in independent work aims to address shifts in terms of what an art practice and, consequently, what an artist can be. The legacy of Conceptual art and the emergence of new media also question the structuring of an art school along traditional artistic media or material such as painting, sculpture, ceramic, fibre, etc. An expansive model of art in contemporary circumstances might well encompass all potential forms, as well as including both analytic and creative ways of thinking. The differences between practices, between kinds of artwork and between motivations and purposes are what make the art field vital and constitute it as an arena of possibilities.

Topicality and discursivity (formatted into a curriculum-based seminar and lecture configuration) are advocated as capable of transcending historic forms of organisation in favour of a structure based on interdisciplinarity and media diversity. In such a model, topics and critical discourses relevant to contemporary visual and cultural production would be foregrounded, investigated and developed. The teaching focus would largely shift from material techniques to intellectual tools in order to model artistic practice as an integration of analytical thinking and the translation of that thinking into manifestations independent of specific media. In its ideal form, a topically *and* discursively organised structure would be open-ended in terms of methodology, continually evolving and negotiated as well as challenged by various processes of what has recently been termed 'artistic

research’—an open-form, but nevertheless rigorous, visual and intellectual investigation meant to result in artistic communication.⁵

Regulation

The currently much-discussed European ‘Bologna Process’ aims at synchronising university education throughout western Europe for the purpose of furthering cultural and scientific integration. It is meant to enable students to choose, change and combine their sites of education as they see fit. The formal structure underlying this exchange is founded on compatible bachelor’s, master’s and philosophical doctorate degrees (BA, MA, PhD). Translated into the art academy, it would produce a curriculum-based path of study composed of seminars, lectures and independent study units led by various teachers.

The larger transformation is recognised by adversaries of the *Meisterschule* principle as a historic possibility to do away with whatever remains of those structures and steer art education away from the master-apprentice model towards a potentially more discursive one. Rather than studying with one professor for four or five years—as is the case in the *Meisterschule*—students would experience working with different teachers and being exposed to a variety of methods and bodies of knowledge. Moreover, they would be able to seamlessly integrate and combine specialty knowledge offered at different art academies and universities in Europe.

Not surprisingly, the application of the Bologna recommendations in art schools has repeatedly produced conflicts which tend to get rhetorically framed not only as a battle of epic proportions, but far too frequently in polarised terms too. For some this shift represents a foolhardy abandonment of standards and continuity as well as submitting art education to the waves of discursive fashions; for others it is a battle of the past versus the present and future, fought by the necessity to be competitive in the contemporary world as well as to rid the academy of what is often seen as a fossilised structure susceptible to nepotism and corruption. These battles cast choices in black and white terms of either self-reproducing formalisms or reflective open-endedness.

Modelling

There is no doubt that such a process offers a genuine opportunity for reform since hardly ever is it possible to reframe the organisational structure of an entire academic institution in one grand sweep: idealistically speaking, a chance for utopia; pragmatically speaking, a chance to rid a school of outmoded yet institutionalised characteristics.

What gets little play in the rhetorical outbursts marking the transformation is a closer look at the most immediate references for the Bologna synchronisation model—the Anglo-American university system. In the universitarian sub-genre of the art academy, one tends to encounter an innocent enthusiasm for a particular model of US-American art school. The art programmes at Columbia University in New York and the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA), for example, have sometimes been singled out as inspiration for future development. Over the last few years, both schools have been the subject of newspaper and art press features and have been lauded as some of the most significant schools for art education today. Attention is being drawn to alumni

success stories, the roster of art world celebrity on faculty, the fact that influential gallery owners prowl graduation shows and so forth. The tenor is that today's successful artists are groomed in these kinds of schools. Such media accounts do not, of course, deliver a discussion of educational principles or structures. That is, after all, not headline material. When European art academies are taking inspiration from such schools, it is nevertheless somewhat troubling that it generally seems to be accepted that an art school is a business whose products are professionalised artists who should practice their profession on a prominent stage. In the current neo-liberal cultural and economic climate, one might be able to sympathise with a fiscal argument about cost control in a university setting. But a problem lies in the confusion that arises if an educational institution's success is measured in economic terms, and, specifically, the economics of the current mainstream mercantile art world. The educational question would be: Is a successful art student someone who is able to line up a number of gallery shows for graduation? Clearly it is problematic to define cultural agency only in market terms. What of someone whose work interrogates the ideological parameters and possibilities of cultural agency? Of course, these goals are not mutually exclusive, but they have a tendency to get in each other's way.

Reproduction

Curriculum requirements in art programmes such as the American ones cited above are often centred on one-to-one meetings with faculty and guests, taking place in school-provided individual studios.⁶ Generous spatial working conditions are, no doubt, an asset for schools as well as students and, to a certain degree, important for a productive learning context. However, this kind of spatial and organisational premise implicitly posits a model of artistic practice in which an artist is someone who works, mostly alone, in a studio where every now and then a member of the faculty, visiting artist, critic or curator comes to discuss the work emerging in this situation. One aim of this spatial and social ritual is to simulate *professional* practice. Although offered, the students' curricular obligation to take courses other than independent study meetings is minimal by comparison. Often it is simply left to the students to decide if their education consists mostly of individual studio practice cum meetings or if other intellectual and social engagement with significant discourses around art, visual culture or other fields is vital to their development. Given the pressures of tuition fees (often in the range of \$30,000 annually), peer success, media affirmation, and, last but not least, the normalisation of this educational set-up, one can grasp the difficulties a student might have in developing an artistic practice that differs from a professionalisation that seeks its rewards in the art market.

The faculty's role in this educational model is two-fold and includes both the drawing out and the leading forth: the explicit feedback role in which a teacher draws out a student's simmering talent in private studio conversations is complemented by the more implicit leading forth into the social rituals that compose the art world. Studio visits are, to some degree, ritualised social encounters in which studio practitioner and visitor play scripted roles for which, in order to inhabit them properly, one has to cultivate a certain habitus, to use Pierre Bourdieu's term for an internalised behavioural pattern that is specific to a social context. In the arena of the art studio, habitus translates as a form of

social courting skill that merges genuine engagement with a hard sell. Education and economics are joined together into one experience that aims at the professionalisation of the art student—and the faculty benefit of being able to deliver success stories as the immediate result of their educational efforts. The development of that habitus is a key to the reproductive functioning of this particular art school model. What is reproduced is not so much intellectual information deposited into students (as it is the case with the banking method) or artistic styles (as it is the case of the master-apprentice model), but a scripted model of what artistic practice is. What an artist does, how she does it, where she does it, and how art circulates once it is made are plainly resolved into a coherent version of a professionalised artistic practice that integrates into the gallery circuit.

It would be unfair to blame studio visits alone for such a reproductive tendency—they undoubtedly have an educational value and offer a chance for student and teacher to articulate what the student is struggling with, and help them move forward and identify effectivities. It takes a seamless combination of spatial isolation, no-obligation curriculums and a highly art-world-integrated school environment to generate that dynamic of reproduction.

If looked at on a structural level, the reproduction of a particular artistic role model under the banner of professionalisation has an uncanny resemblance to the principle of the *Meisterschule*. Although more liberal-minded and less focused on artistic style than the traditional *Meisterschule*, the above model is highly effective in normalising artistic practice: in this case as a business practice. Consequently, artistic agency is redefined as the ability to function professionally in a neo-liberal economic model of culture that readily masks its shortcomings and retrograde tendencies—maybe not by purpose but by effect.

Curriculum and Structure

Whereas several prominent US-American art schools operate smoothly within this model, many European art schools—particularly those still battling with the remnants of the *Meisterschule*—are at a crossroads imposed upon them by the Bologna process. As one can see from taking a closer look at the choice of references discussed in that process, the challenge these European schools are facing lies less in the embattled BA/MA/PhD model, but in how to functionally implement notions of topicality and discursivity within that model, in order to develop an educational structure that is capable of defining artistic production as both a social process and a cultural practice. Another battle seems to be looming right around the corner and it will be fought around the minute details of curriculum.

The advocates of structured curriculums believe that there are certain sets of knowledge that are the foundation to an individual's explorations. What these sets of knowledge are is, again, highly contested—for good reasons, since the question of the nature of that knowledge is highly ideological. Even in Art schools that one would deem more progressive, the question of how to balance the need or urge to structure curriculums with a freeform exploratory approach is critical. This balance is often precarious, sometimes eloquently articulated, or—more often than not—taciturnly embedded in institutional structures. Whereas the above-mentioned example shows how, under certain conditions, tilting to one side can produce a capitulation to the marketplace, the other end of

this equation could result in academic over-structuring and knowledge transfer according to the banking method. Both cases are reproductive in tendency.

Within an open-ended framework such as an art school, it seems vitally important that the core curriculum expand its scope beyond independent work, artistic technique and spotty art history, to focus on investigation and analysis of the various contexts artistic production stand in relation to and are influenced by. These include the ideologies, histories and current conditions of aesthetic, cultural, social, political and economic frameworks. Correlating individuals' artistic desires with these larger contexts in a dynamic enterprise might provide, generally speaking, the means for developing critical consciousness and articulating a form of cultural agency that goes beyond professionalisation. Together they constitute a broad agenda for contemporary art education. One goal in particular may be to equip students with a set of methodological models (rather than one method) and the means to their application.

Example: Social Process and Collaboration

In thinking through a notion of leading (students) forth to develop artistic and cultural agency beyond the kind of professionalisation outlined above—for instance, agency based on non-market-centred models that speak to various social dimensions of cultural practices—questions emerge such as: How can social process be taught? How do people learn how to collaborate effectively?

We should state clearly that we do not believe individual practice to be conservative and collaboration to be progressive. This essay attempts to look critically, and with vested interest, at current configurations of the field of art education, noting fundamental conditions and tendencies we have experienced. Within the larger discussion this is part of, various art school models may appear to be on a positional or hierarchical field, within which models are either negative or positive. But things are not so black and white and it is not our intention to advocate one model *against* another, but to advocate an opening up along lines of our particular interests and experience. Our primary aim here is to analyse what particular situations encourage and discourage, and highlight the potential transformation of the social relations (and subsequent artistic production) within differently organised educative environments.

As we have seen above, being ego-oriented with a focus on individuation has been normalised beyond questioning, particularly in the cultural field. Art as social process, collaboration and collective production are largely omitted as topics and models from many schools and institutions. These modes are often denigrated as ideological, or as something people try when they are younger, and then feel that they have outgrown, or that they should move on to develop their singular voices. For instance, it is commonly believed that collaboration eclipses individual practice—which sets up a specious binary relationship—when in fact they can be balanced to productively fuel one another. Collaboration is rarely presented as a viable method, or even simply as a fact of most creativity and production and worth knowing about for that reason. We believe it is important to broaden the field of references to include specific models and principles of effective collaboration as potential influence and inspiration, in order to pose a counter-paradigm to the standard definition of art practice. Only if one knows of differing models is

one able to make choices and take what is needed and desired from various sources.

Clearly, artistic production as social process and collaboration should not be essentialised or regarded as mandatory, to be taught according to formulas laid out in curriculum reports. That kind of regimentation is antithetical to the principles of dynamic collaborative process and would certainly undermine its discursive character, which is so valuable as method for thinking and acting. In this mix, which is in part a discussion of institutionalisation, there is a risk of rendering social engagement and collaboration into genres and medias as opposed to ways of working, guiding principles or operating systems. But from our perspectives, the values of collaboration and collectivity—their inherent tendency to complexify and contextualise—need to be amply represented, theorised and experienced in the context of art education. In art education, collaborative structures and process *as a mode of authorship* need to be effectively brought into the field of models that are referenced, articulated and investigated, including through practice.

Offering—in the course of teaching *and* in the minute details of art school structure—a genuine chance to encounter, analyse and test a variety of modes of artistic practice represents the groundwork for producing artistic agency. Beyond a subject matter for articulation and study, we believe that social process and genuine collaboration as guiding principles, to be evidenced through a number of means, are essential to the effectivity of the topicality and discursivity structure discussed above. If such a programme is aimed at pedagogical empowerment, then the programme itself must be reflexive and open to critical process, including from within.

Were a genuine collaborative spirit along with vigilance against reproducing authoritarian power relations be brought to bear in the acts of leading forth and the democratisation of the educative environment, then not only would relations between students, teachers and institution be reconfigured, but dynamic social engagement as part of a continual process of becoming and being an artist would be central to practice as a means for both individual and collective agency.

Notes:

1. Genevieve Lloyd, 'Education', in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris, eds., (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), pp. 97 ff.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970) and *The Politics of Education. Culture, Power, and Liberation* (Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1985); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress, Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

5. Papers from a recent conference in the Netherlands on this new buzzword have been published in *Artistic Research*, Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager, eds., (Amsterdam: Lier en Boog, 2004).

6. On these issues see Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).