

Fillip



Kristina Lee Podesva

A Pedagogical Turn: Brief Notes on Education as Art

Let us begin with the simple proposition that education as a *form* of art making constitutes a relatively new medium. It is distinct from projects that take education and its institution, the academy, as a *subject* or facilitator of production and is worth examining in more detail through the following questions: How has the medium of education been historically situated? What movements and practices have conditioned its appearance? What does its circulation tell us about the academy—and art making—in the present? And finally, does the emergence of this medium represent a fad, or is it a manifestation of a larger and more sustained “pedagogical turn” in contemporary art?

Q: Why begin with questions? Are they not containers for concealment, disguises for the pre-determined, echoes of objectivity, apertures masking closures?

A:

One of the most well known instances of education as a *form* of art appears in Joseph Beuys’ practice beginning in the 1970s. While earlier efforts undertaken by the Russian Constructivists, the Bauhaus, and the faculty of Black Mountain College, among others, sought to erode the distinction between art and life through educational vehicles, they did not appropriate pedagogical forms in their artistic production, using them instead as a means to an end. By contrast, Beuys presented scores of educational lectures as performances, documented in a series of photographs and blackboard drawings that register the artists’ actions. Alain Borer has compared these “drawings” to the black monochromes of both Kasimir Malevich and Ad Reinhardt, but makes an important distinction, stating that Beuys’ monochromes form a larger and single “didactic installation” characterized by a continuous temporality, which Beuys described as a “permanent conference.” Thus, these performance-lectures were not temporally bounded in a string of discrete, finite events, but were intended to prompt further discussions carried out by the audience (post-performance) in a situation not unlike Documenta 5 (1972), where Beuys installed an office of the “Organization for Direct Democracy by Referendum” to initiate conversations on a range of topics including politics and art.

These projects exemplify Social Sculpture, a concept and medium the artist devised and later theorized in “I am Searching for Field Character” (1973), which articulates his belief in the creative capacity of every individual to shape society through participation in cultural, political, and economic life. With his proclamation that “EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ART-IST,” poised to join others in the construction of “A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART,” Beuys reprised the fervor and axiomatic language of manifestos written by avant-garde artists in the early twentieth century. This promulgation expanded what art could be by acknowledging the viewer’s ability to co-create meaning alongside the artist and, consequently, placed the production of art *and* knowledge within the scope of the viewer just as much as that of the artist.

In practice, however, Beuys did not relinquish control of his productions so easily and generously, alternately maintaining and mocking the authority invested in his position as artist and as pedagogue. The Düsseldorf Academy of Art fired him in 1972 after he opened his course to

any student who wished to attend it, a direct violation of the school's admissions policy. The postcard multiple *Demokratie ist lustig / Democracy is Fun* (1973) shows Beuys moments after his dismissal wearing an amused look and broad grin on his face, flanked by uniformed policemen who stand as guarantors of a social order in which free and open education is not permitted. Before, during, and after these events, Beuys encouraged a series of protests at the school, and within the year he had teamed up with writer Henrich Böll to co-found the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research in Düsseldorf as an open forum and site for democratic and creative study and expression.

What is striking about these events, like many of the actions Beuys performed, are the paradoxes that underlie them. On the one hand, the artist sought to secure education and equality for all. But on the other, this mission to democratize society hinged upon *his* persona and insight, authorized by modernist beliefs in the sensitivity and sophistication of the artist and teacher. As such, Beuys simultaneously challenged *and* reinforced the patriarchal power structure of the academy and the authority of the artist; a benevolent father he might have been, but a father he was nonetheless. Still, despite its many contradictions, Beuys' practice laid the groundwork for subsequent movements including institutional critique and relational aesthetics, which have, in turn, revived education as art.

The use of dematerialized mediums such as lectures, classes, and discussions may have conditioned a shift from site-specific art making, in which particularized, physical space was a paramount concern, to institutional critique, which expanded the notion of site to include its sociological frames or institutional context. As Miwon Kwon has observed in her essay "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," for artists representative of this shift, it was "the art institution's *techniques* and *effects* as they circumscribe the definition, production, presentation, and dissemination of art that [became] the site of critical intervention."⁵ (read footnote):#note5 Thus, for Kwon, works in this genre favour production that is less visual and material in nature both as a means to resist commodification by the art institution, but also to interrogate the relationship between an artwork and its location.

The performative and pedagogical inflection of Beuys' art anticipated works of institutional critique including Andrea Fraser's *Museum Highlights* (1989) and Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992). In the former, Fraser adopts the character of a docent at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and is filmed leading unsuspecting visitors through the museum on tours. What is uncovered by this performance-lecture is the museum as an institution embedded within a skein of social, financial, and political networks. Ultimately undermining the authority of the museum to determine what art is and signifies, the work uses performance and education (in parodic disguise) as a form of art making. As for the latter, Wilson rearranged museum displays at the Maryland Historical Museum in Baltimore to arresting effect by articulating forgotten or untold histories in a process of public re-education. He selected a set of silver goblets and a pair of slave shackles from the museum's collection storage and presented them together under the title *Metalwork, 1723-1880*, bringing to light the politics of museological practice and presentation in terms of repressing certain histories. Here, Wilson, like Fraser, pries open the museum's role in modeling our appreciation and understanding of art as well as of history (or lack thereof) through performative and or pedagogical strategies reminiscent of Beuys.

Q: *What happens when questioning itself becomes the answer Can we run a concrete course, over and over*

A:

While institutional critique productively intersects with Beuys' practice, it also shares similar contradictions. We have already seen where Beuys' performative and pedagogical work is predicated on his supposedly unique ability to expose power. Museums and galleries have subsequently recognized in artists such as Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Fred Wilson, and Andrea Fraser, among others, a special aptitude for evaluating the authoritative forms and functions of art institutions. They regularly invite these artists to *perform* critiques that ostensibly disclose institutional machinations but do not go so far as to propose redistributions of power. These works operate more on the level of spectacle both during and also after the fact through photographs and films that record the artist in full "critical" force. Consequently, institutions easily absorb projects of institutional critique demonstrating how little purchase these assessments have in the long run. Assuming the position of critic, artists working in this genre also privilege their perspectives over others, making their work entirely contingent upon specific targets, which they have selected alone and in close consultation with museums and galleries. In Beuys' work, the problem does not revolve so much around his spectacularization of criticism, but rather that he presented himself as having a singular insight into what issues deserved our attention, whether that was direct democracy or free education. Nonetheless, he did invite people to participate in his performances, with or without the agreement of institutions (educational, artistic, or otherwise), to co-create meaning and to address the issues he found pressing. In many ways, Beuys' legitimization of collaboration and interaction as a means of making art is foundational to relational aesthetics.

First conceptualized by Nicholas Bourriaud in 1998, relational aesthetics has categorized a number of practices that came to prominence in the 1990s. Claire Bishop observes that these practices tend to involve hybrid installations in which the audience is invited to engage in some form of activity that defines a space reserved for relating socially. For Bishop, artists who work with relational aesthetics, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick, offer a "microtopian ethos" in lieu of "utopian propositions," where the space of the gallery delimits a social setting in which viewers co-produce the meaning of the work. By way of example, a gallery expresses a microtopian ethos when an artist re-purposes it as a site of refuge from the real world (even though he or she attempts to recreate social interactions there typically associated with existing places such as the pub or community centre). In this way, this work does not encourage us to strive for a larger utopian goal—such as securing permanent and free communal space—but rather to sit back and enjoy, in whatever way we can, the here and now offered by the artist courtesy of the gallery.

Tiravanija's *Untitled* (1992) represents one early and illustrious example of relational aesthetics. The artist moved the entire inventory of Gallery 303 in New York into its exhibition rooms and then converted the storage and office areas into a provisional kitchen where he made Thai curries for visitors during regular business hours. Traces of his actions remained on display at the gallery when he was absent. Yet, for Tiravanija, the

art does not reside in the actions shown, but in what they facilitate: "a convivial relationship between audience and artist."⁸ (read footnote):#note8 Like Beuys' work dealing with education, relational projects such as *Untitled* foreground conversations and experiences among viewers, recognizing their participation in the co-creation of meaning through the experience of an artwork. Unlike Beuys, however, artists working in this genre do not hold out the promise of "FREE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM," nor do they antagonize the site of their work as an institution. Instead, they strategically recast the gallery as a microtopian site for relating, which stops short of addressing the politics behind the shrinking of free social space in the world today. By emphasizing the social dimensions of contemporary life, practices of relational aesthetics appear to neglect how the social is imbricated in the political and the economic.

Extending the creative and democratic imaginary Beuys developed through *Social Sculpture*, artists who appropriate education as a medium for art making whether in the form of a school, knowledge exchanges, reading groups, lectures, laboratories, and so on, could be seen as a subset of practices that treat site specificity more broadly. Kwon observes that in the period since institutional critique (from the 1970s onward) artists have turned away from the art institution toward more quotidian spaces such as the street, stores, homes, and schools as possible sites of engagement. She concludes that the "distinguishing characteristic of today's site-oriented art is the way in which the artwork's relationship to the actuality of a location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are both subordinate to a discursively determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate," which does not exist a priori, but is generated through the work itself.

Q: *What does it mean when we accept answers without asking questions Is it like being given a life jacket in exchange for your sailboat*

A:

Perhaps even more than the museum, then, the academy, as a site of cultural knowledge production par excellence provides a compelling space for further interrogation. The art world's growing interest in the academy is not unique. Within the last two decades, neoliberal ideology has increasingly restructured the academy according to its goals and priorities into, according to David Harvey, a theoretical program of "political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade."¹² (read footnote):#note12 Besides privatization, neoliberalism has also systematized academic work such that knowledge production operates according to market logic where patentability, utility, and quantitative methods are valued over collaborative, speculative, and qualitative approaches. The inevitable outcome to this hierarchical arrangement is that critical experimentation is discouraged, or worse, rendered obsolete.

Harvey identifies the academy as an important component in the "construction of consent," a process in which the once fringe ideology of neoliberalism became mainstreamed in the United States, at a micro level, through established institutions such as schools, universities, and churches. This ideology spread because it presented in quite logical and natural terms the sanctity of individual rights and the universal value of democracy. In fact, it legitimated the free market by collapsing the discourse of individual rights with the idea that corporations are individuals entitled to the same inalienable rights. At the macro level, several primary vehicles such as the courts, the media, and, finally, the academy have helped to not only disseminate, but shape neoliberal values. Conservative think tanks (research groups sited on university campuses to formulate strategies for achieving social and political aims) provide one solid example of how the culture of consent operates. Increasing in numbers since the 1970s, think tanks have become the de facto "educational arm" of the corporations that fund them.

In her essay "Academy as Potentiality," Irit Rogoff draws attention to the changing priorities of the academy and proposes an alternative to its corporatization through the adoption of research and knowledge projects that privilege what is *significant* over what is *useful*. She introduces the concept of potentiality (and fallibility) as a way of re-thinking and re-making the academy as a space for speculation and experimentation rather than the manufacture of knowledge products. Rogoff and other academics throughout Europe feel threatened by the Bologna Accord, which proposes to standardize all institutions and programs of higher education within the European Union by 2010 such that degree programs across all disciplines will be interchangeable and uniform following North American models. According to Stephan Dilleuth, the Bologna Accord emerged out of research developed by the Centre for Higher Education, a think tank founded in 1995 by the Bertelsmann Corporation, a worldwide media conglomerate, with interests in creating new markets for media products and, no doubt, a culture of consent.

It would be too easy to blame the neoliberal agenda for the academy's current corporatization, however, particularly in regard to the education of the artist. Although it would appear that neoliberalism has made "The MFA the New MBA" in the 2004 *Harvard Business Review* article by Daniel Pink, it is the various arts institutions that grant MFAs as a professional degree for tens of thousands of dollars a year that are first and foremost responsible for this equivalence. As Okwui Enwezor has pointed out, this scenario renders the MFA as "useless" as the MBA in respect to the production of meaning in art.¹⁷ (read footnote):#note17

Q: *_When there are no spaces for questioning, where do questions go Do they accumulate in the exchanges between people, remain hushed in dusty cabinets, or dissolve like ash in a cold spray _*

A:

It is into this current milieu that education as art is being reborn. Taking from the earlier precedent of Beuys' work with the academy as an authoritative institution, these new works, including projects such as the Copenhagen Free University (founded in 2001), Playshop (2004), the Momentary Academy (2005), and the School of Panamerican Unrest (2006-2007), to name a few, trade the wisdom and charisma of a Beuysian figure for a collaborative and contemporary set of learning experiences and exchanges. Like many projects associated with institutional critique, these works engage with the academy as an institution, and are located discursively (but not necessarily physically) within

the site of the academy. At the same time, they sidestep the closures of critiques, which narrowly focus on institutional failures, offering instead to open up the academy through reinvention.

In 2001, for example, Danish artists Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen founded the Copenhagen Free University (CFU) in their apartment and began to offer a free space and online resource “dedicated to the production of critical consciousness and poetic language.”¹⁹ (read footnote):#note19 The CFU’s website contains numerous critical theory texts in Danish and English, a web library with supplementary texts, links to affiliated organizations around the world, and a few digital artworks including *17 Theses on Knowledge Production*, which features scrolling statements such as the following:

Echoing Vladimir Tatlin’s exuberant appeal for an “art into life,” the idea of turning *knowledge* into life (and relocating knowledge from the ivory tower to those spaces occupied in the everyday) is only one of many redefinitions at work in this project. The CFU re-imagines the form and function of art making, knowledge production (and by extension the academy), and authorship (collaborative versus autonomous). Moreover, it attempts to dissolve the barrier between the public and private by siting educational activities in a residential space. Rather than limiting its exploration to critique, it creates a working alternative to stale and outmoded practices of artistic and intellectual production.

From my research into art projects that take educational forms as their medium, I have observed in the CFU and other works shared concerns and characteristics, which include the following:

1. A school structure that operates as a social medium.
2. A dependence on collaborative production.
3. A tendency toward process (versus object) based production.
4. An aleatory or open nature.
5. An ongoing and potentially endless temporality.
6. A free space for learning.
7. A post-hierarchical learning environment where there are no teachers, just co-participants.
8. A preference for exploratory, experimental, and multi-disciplinary approaches to knowledge production.
9. An awareness of the instrumentalization of the academy.
10. A virtual space for the communication and distribution of ideas.

Nearly twenty years ago, Ian Wallace wrote “The Idea of the University,” an essay that discusses how the image and function of art and the university will always fall short of our expectations since they are both falsely idealized. Although we may come to understand how our perception of the truth-telling power of both art and the university (and by extension the academy and education) is illusory and derives from specific rather than universal values, we do not and cannot seem to abandon either ideal, adopting instead reformist (in the better case) or resigned (in the worse case) approaches to achieving their promise. It is, perhaps, through education as a form of art making that we do not settle for better or for worse.

About this Article

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Kristina Lee Podesva is Editor of *Fillip*.

Notes

01. Other notable instances include Robert Filliou and John Cage’s discussion in *Teaching and Learning as Performance Arts* from 1970 and Iain Baxter’s teaching performances, which he began in the late 1960s.
02. Alain Borer, “A Lament for Joseph Beuys,” *The Essential Joseph Beuys*, ed. Lothar Schirmer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 14.
03. Joseph Beuys, “I am Searching for Field Character,” *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 125.
04. The Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research continues to exist in various chapters worldwide.
05. Miwon Kwon, “One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity,” *October* (Spring 1997): 37.
06. Andrea Fraser has declared that artists are now the embodiment of the institution and that institutional critique is in fact dead. See “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Artforum* (September 2005): 278–283.
07. Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* (Fall 2004): 54.
08. *Ibid.*, 56.
09. Beuys, 125.
10. Kwon, 37–8.
11. This is demonstrated in Documenta 12’s final leitmotif, exhibitions such as *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y* (2005–2006), and projects like *unitednationsplaza* (2006–2007) to name a few.
12. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.
13. *Ibid.*, 39. # *Ibid.*, 43–44.
14. Irit Rogoff, “Academy as Potentiality,” *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006), 14.
15. Stephan Dilleuth, “Schools of Thought,” *Frieze* (September 2006): 144.
16. Okwui Enwezor, “Schools of Thought,” *Frieze* (September 2006): 143.
17. For a longer list of education as art projects, see Joseph del Pesco’s Edu-Projects page at <http://www.delpesco.com/blog/archives>

/edu-projects/.

18. Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen, Copenhagen Free University Information: [_http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/infouk.html](http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/infouk.html) (accessed 1 November 2006).
19. Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen, Copenhagen Free University Information, *17 Theses on Knowledge Production*: <http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/theses.html> (accessed 1 November 2006).
20. Ian Wallace, "The Idea of the University," *The Idea of the University* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery, 1990).

image: Copenhagen Free University, *The Factory of Escape*, 2003-5.

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