

There is Nothing Less Passive than the Act of Fleeing

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What follows is a condensed and edited version of a text for a panel that was presented at UCIRA's "Future Tense: Alternative Arts and Economies in the University" conference held in San Diego, California on November 18, 2010.

The panel shared the same name as a 13-day itinerant seminar in Berlin organized by Dockray, Waldorf, and Fiona Whitton earlier that year, in July. The seminar began with an excerpt from Tiqqun's Introduction to Civil War, which was co-translated into English by Smith; and later read a chapter from Pasquinelli's Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons. Both authors have also participated in meetings at The Public School in Los Angeles and Berlin.

Both the panel and the seminar developed out of longer conversations at The Public School in Los Angeles, which began in late 2007 under Telic Arts Exchange. The Public School is a school with no curriculum, where classes are proposed and organized by the public.

The Education Factory

The University as I understand it, has been a threshold between youth and the labor market. Or it has been a threshold between a general education and a more specialized one. In its more progressive form, it's been a zone of transition into an expanding middle class. But does this form still exist? I'm inclined to think just the opposite, that the University is becoming a mean for filtering people out of the middle class via student loan debt, which now exceeds credit card debt.

The point of the questions for me is simply what is the point of the University? What are we fighting for or defending?

The next question might be, do students work? The University is a crucial site in the reproduction of class relations; we know that students are consumers; we know the student is a future worker who will be compelled to work, and work in a specific way, because she/he is crushed by debt contracted during her/his tenure as a student; we know that students work while attending school, and that for many students school and work eerily begin to resemble one another. But asking whether students work is to ask something more specific: do students produce value and, therefore surplus-value? If we can assume, for the moment, that students are a factor in the "knowledge production" that takes place in the University, is this production of knowledge also the production of value? We confront, maybe, a paradox: all social activity has become "productive" - captured, absorbed - at the very moment value becomes unmeasurable.

What does this have to do with students, and their work? The thesis of the social factory was supplemented by the assumption that knowledge had become a central mode in the production of value in post-Fordist environments. Wouldn't this mean that the university could become an increasingly important flashpoint in social struggles, now that it has become not simply the site of the reproduction of the capital relation, but involved in the immediate production process, directly productive of value? Would we have to understand students themselves as, if not knowledge producers, an irreplaceable moment or function within that process? None of this remains clear. The question is not only a sociological one, it is also a political one. The strategy of reconceptualizing students as workers is rooted in the classical Marxist identification of revolt with the point of production, that is, exploitation. To declare all social activity to be productive is another way of saying that social war can be triggered at any site within society, even among the precarious, the unemployed, and students.

“Knowledge is tied to struggle. To truly know is to hate truly. This is why the working class can know and possess everything of capital, as it is enemy to itself as capital.” (Tronti, 1966)¹

That form of “hate” mentioned by Tronti is suggesting something interesting form of political passion and a new *modus operandi*. The relation between hate and knowledge, suggested by Tronti, is the opposite of the cynical detachment of the new social figure of the entrepreneur-artist but it’s a joyful hate of our condition. In order to educate ourselves we should hate our very own environment and social network in which we were educated — the university.

The position of the artist in their work and the performance of themselves (often no different) can take are manifold. There are histories for all of these postures that can be referenced and adopted. They are all acceptable tactics as long as we keep doing and churning out more. But where does this get us, both within the confines of the arts and the larger social structure? We are taught that the artist is always working, thinking, observing. We have learned the tricks of communication, performance and adaptability. We can go anywhere, react to anything, respond in a thoughtful and creative way to all problems. And we do this because while there is opportunity, we should take it. “We shouldn’t complain, others have it much worse.” But it doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t imagine something else. To begin thinking this way, it means a refusal to deliver an event, to perform on demand. Maybe we need a kind of inflexibility, of obstruction, of non-conductivity. After all, what exactly are we producing and performing for? Can we try to think about these talents of performance, of communication? If so, could this be the basis for an intimacy, a friendship... another institution?

Alternative pedagogical models

Let’s consider briefly the desire for “new pedagogical models”

and “new forms of knowledge production”. When articulated by the University, this simply means new forms of instruction and new forms of research. Liberal faculty and neoliberal politicians or administrators find themselves joined in this hunt for future models and forms. On the one hand, faculty imagines that these new techniques can provide space for continuing the good. On the other hand, investors, politicians, and administrators look for any means to make the University profitable; use unpaid labour, eliminate non-productive physical spaces, and create new markets.

Symptomatically, there is very little resistance to this search for new forms and new models for the simple reason that there is a consensus that the University should and will continue.

It’s also important to note that many of the so-called new forms and new models being considered lie beyond the walls and payroll of the institution, therefore both low-cost and low-risk. It is now a familiar story: the institution attempts to renew itself by importing its own critique.

The Public School is not a new model and it’s not going to save the University. It is not even a critique of the University any more or less than it is a critique of the field of art or of capitalist society. It is not “the next university” because it is a practice of leaving the University to the side. It would be a mistake to think that this means isolation or total detachment.

Today, the forms of university governance cannot allow themselves to uproot self-education. To the contrary, self-education constitutes a vital sap for the survival of the institutional ruins, snatched up and rendered valuable in the form of revenue. Governance is the trap, hasty and flexible, of the common. Instead of countering us frontally, the enemy follows us. We must immediately reject any weak interpretation of the theme of autonomous institutions, according to which the institution is a self-governed structure that lives between the folds of capitalism, without excessively bothering it. The institutionalisation of self-education doesn’t mean being recognized as one actor among

many within the education market, but the capacity to organize living knowledge's autonomy and resistance.

One of the most important “new pedagogical models” that emerged over the past year in the struggles around the implosion of the “public” university are the occupations that took place in the Fall of 2009. Unlike other forms of action, which tend to follow the timetable and cadence of the administration, to the point of mirroring it, these actions had their own temporality, their own initiative, their own internal logic. They were not at all concerned with saving a university that was already in ruins, but rather with creating a space at the heart of the University within which something else, some future, could be risked, elaborated, prefigured. Everything had to be improvised, from moment to moment, and in these improvisations new knowledges were developed and shared. This improvisation was demanded by the aleatory quality of the types of relations that emerged within these spaces, relations no longer regulated by the social alibis that assigns everyone her/his place. When students occupy university buildings - here in California, in NYC, in Puerto Rico, in Europe and the UK, everywhere - they do so not because they want to save their universities. They do so because they know the university for what it is, as something to be at once seized and abandoned. They know that they can only rely on and learn from one another.

The Common and The Public

What is really so disconcerting about this antinomy between the logic of the common and the logic of the social or the public? For Jacotot, it means the development of a communist politics that is neither reformist nor seditious². It proposes the formation of common spaces at a distance from -- if not outside of -- the public sphere and its communicative reason: “whoever forsakes the workings of the social machine has the opportunity to make the electrical energy of the emancipation machine.”

What does it mean to forsake the social machine? That is the

major political question facing us today. Such a forsaking would require that our political energies organize themselves around spaces of experimentation at a distance not only from the university and what is likely its slow-motion, or sudden, collapse, but also from an entire imaginary inherited from the workers movement: the task of a future social emancipation and vectors and forms of struggle such a task implies. Perhaps what is required is not to put off equality for the future, but presuppose the common, to affirm that commons as a fact, a given, which must nevertheless be verified, created, not by a social body, not by a collective force, but a power of the common, now.

School is not University. Neither is it Academy or College or even Institute. We are all familiar with the common meaning of the word: it is a place for learning. In another sense, it also refers to organized education in general, which is made most clear by the decision to leave, to “drop out of school”. Alongside these two stable, almost architectural definitions, the word gestures to composition and movement – the school of bodies, moving independently, together; the school only exists as long as that collective movement does. The school takes shape in this oscillation between form and formlessness, not through the act of constructing a wall but by the process of realizing its boundary through practice.

Perhaps this is a way to think of how to develop what Felix Guattari called “the associative sector” in 1982 : “everything that isn’t the state, or private capital, or even cooperatives”³. At first gloss, the associative sector is only a name for the remainder, the already outside; but, in the language of a school, it is a constellation of relationships, affinities, new subjectivities, and movements, flickering into existence through life and use, An “engaged withdrawal” that simultaneously creates an exit and institutes in the act of passing through.

Which itself might bring us back to school, to the Greek etymology of school, *skhole*, “a holding back”, a “keeping clear”

of space for reflective distance. On the one hand, perhaps this reflective space simply allows theoretical knowledge to shape or affect performative action; but on the other hand, the production of this “clearing” is not given, certainly not now and certainly not by the institutions that claim to give it. Reflective space is not the precondition for performative action. On the contrary; performative action is the precondition for reflective space – or, more appropriately, space and action must be coproduced.

Is the University even worth “saving”? We are right to respond with indignation, or better, with an array of tactics - some procedural, some more “direct” - against these incursions, which always seem to authorize themselves by appeals to economic austerity, budget shortfalls, and tightened belts. Perhaps what is being destroyed in this process is the very notion of the public sphere itself, a notion that. It is easy to succumb to the illusion that the only possible result of this destruction of the figure of the public is privatization. But what if the figure of the public was to be set off against not only the private and property relations, but against a figure of the “common” as well? What if, in other words, the notion of the public has always been an unstable, mediating term between privatization and communization, and what if the withering of this mediation left these two process openly at odds with each other? Perhaps, then, it is not simply a question of saving a university and, more broadly, a public space that is already withering away; maybe our energies and our intelligence, our collective or common intellectual forces, should be devoted to organizing and articulating just this sort of counter-transition, at a distance from the public and the private.

Authorship and new forms of knowledge

For decades we have spoken about the “death of the author”. The most sustained critiques of authorship have been made from the spheres of art and education, but not coincidentally, these spheres have the most invested in the notion. Credit and accreditation are the mechanisms for attaching symbolic capital

to individuals via degrees and other lines on CVs. The curriculum vitæ is an inverted credit report, evidence of underpaid work, kept orderly with an expectation of some future return.

All of this work, this self-documentation, this fidelity between ourselves and our papers, is for what, for whom? And what is the consequence of a world where every person is armed with their vitæ, other than “the war of all against all?” It’s that sensation that there are no teams but everyone has got their own jersey.

The idea behind the project The Public School is to teach each other in a very horizontal way. No curriculum, no hierarchy. But is The Public School able to produce new knowledge and new content by itself? Can the The Public School become a sort of autonomous collective author? Or, is The Public School just about exchanges and social networking?

In the recent history of university struggles, some collectives started to refresh the idea of coresearch; a form of knowledge that can produce new subjectivities by researching. New subjectivities that produce new knowledge and new knowledge that produces new subjectivities. If knowledge comes only from conflict, knowledge goes back to conflict in order to produce new autonomy and subjectivities.

1 - Mario Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, Einaudi, Torino, 1966 (DeriveApprodi, Roma, 2006)

2 - Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford University Press, 1991

3 - Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Molecular revolution in Brazil* ; Semiotext(e), 2007

Sean Dockray, Matteo Pasquinelli, Jason Smith and Caleb Waldorf are founding members of and collaborators at The Public School. Initiated in 2007 under Telic Arts Exchange (literally in the basement) in Los Angeles, The Public School is a school with no curriculum. At the moment, it operates as follows: first, classes are proposed by the public; then, people have the opportunity to sign up for the classes; finally, when enough people have expressed interest, the school finds a teacher and offers the class to those who signed up. The Public School is not accredited, it does not give out degrees, and it has no affiliation with the public school system. It is a framework that supports autodidactic activities, operating under the assumption that everything is in everything. The Public School currently exists in Los Angeles, New York, Berlin, Brussels, Helsinki, Philadelphia, Durham, San Juan, and is still expanding.