

V. *Academic Capitalism*

Anton Vidokle, the artist-curator of *unitednationsplaza* and *Night School*, recently observed that

Schools are one of the few places left where experimentation is to some degree encouraged, where emphasis is supposedly on process and learning rather than product. Schools are also multidisciplinary institutions by nature, where discourse, practice and presentation can co-exist without privileging one over the other.⁵⁵

From a position internal to the academy, however, this emphasis on free experimentation can seem somewhat idealised. Professional academia in the UK, and increasingly in Europe, has since the 1980s become increasingly subject to the continual withdrawal of government subsidies, leading higher education to operate within a business framework.⁵⁶ Entrepreneurial research activities, encouraging partnerships with industry, increased student participation at lower national cost, and incentivising the recruitment of high-fee-paying overseas students all led to the encroachment of the profit motive into the university and to what has been called ‘academic capitalism’.⁵⁷ As such, the ethos of education has shifted accordingly. In *The University in Ruins* (1996), Bill Readings argues that the university was once ‘linked to the destiny of the nation-state by virtue of its role as producer, protector and inculcator of an idea of national culture’.⁵⁸ Under economic globalisation this situation has changed: the university’s function is no longer tied to the self-reproduction of the nation-state. Instead, the key currency of today’s university, Readings argues, is no longer culture or moral values but the de-referentialised concept of ‘excellence’: it doesn’t matter *what* is being taught or researched, only that it is being done ‘excellently’. Recently this situation has changed once more. Since the financial crash of 2008, the benchmark is no longer excellence, but market success: if the content attracts students, and therefore income, it is justified.⁵⁹

Academic capitalism leads to changes in the roles of both students and teachers, and affects both the aesthetic and ethos of an educational experience. Today the administrator rather than the professor is the central figure of the university.⁶⁰ Learning outcomes, assessment criteria, quality assurance, surveys, reports, and a comprehensive paper trail (to combat potentially litigious students) are all more important than experimental content and delivery. Assessment must fit standardised procedures that allow credit points to be comparable across all subjects in the university – and with the introduction of the Bologna Process (1999), to be equivalent across Europe.⁶¹ In the UK, the introduction of tuition fees in the early 1990s and the replacement of student grants by loans has rapidly turned students into consumers. Education is increasingly a financial investment,

rather than a creative space of freedom and discovery; a career move, rather than a place of epistemological inquiry for its own sake. Ostensibly in the name of protecting students' rights, laborious measures of control have been introduced that submit students and teachers to an exhaustive training in bureaucracy: all students in UK universities today (including art students) have to fill in compulsory 'Personal Development Plans' to address their career development – a mechanism to ensure that emerging artists and scholars always keep an eye on developing 'transferable skills' for a future in the 'knowledge economy'. In other words, the contemporary university seems increasingly to train subjects for life under global capitalism, initiating students into a lifetime of debt, while coercing staff into ever more burdensome forms of administrative accountability and disciplinary monitoring. More than ever, education is a core 'ideological state apparatus' through which lives are shaped and managed to dance in step with the dominant tune.

It's clear that a *curatorial* interest in education is a conscious reaction to these trends. In 2006, the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst in Antwerp, and the Hamburg Kunstverein collaborated on a conference and exhibition project called *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y* that explicitly positioned itself as a response to these ideological shifts, and specifically against the Bologna Process.⁶² For the curators of *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y*, the autonomy of the university and the museum are equally under threat, and yet both institutions offer the greatest potential for rethinking how we generate knowledge – and indeed, for understanding what type of autonomy and freedom we want to defend.⁶³ It is harder to argue that contemporary *artists* are engaging with these changes directly, even while these ideological shifts form the most compelling backdrop for the recent surge of interest in education as the site of political change. While Group Material were explicitly influenced by Paulo Freire, the formative pedagogic models for the artists discussed here seem at first glance largely idiosyncratic: their own teachers (in the case of Althamer), or Joseph Beuys (in the case of Bruguera and Hirschhorn). And yet, as Mark Dion notes, there is a general sense among artists who teach in art schools that 'education as a countercultural experience is endangered': not simply through the strict timetabling of classes (because the use of every room is costed), but through compulsory training in 'faculty sensitivity', designed to eliminate fraternising and all risk of improper conduct between students and teachers.⁶⁴

The hyper-bureaucratisation of education in the Western hemisphere does not, of course, account for artists turning to education in non-Western contexts, where their projects tend to be a compensation for more acute institutional shortcomings. This difference is evident in two contemporary library projects by artists: *Martha Rosler Library* (2006), a collection of books that this US artist has amassed since the late 1960s,



Martha Rosler Library, New York, 2006



Lia Perjovschi, Centre for Art Analysis, 1990

and Lia Perjovschi's *Contemporary Art Archive*, or *Centre for Art Analysis* (1990–) in Bucharest, an idiosyncratic collection of photocopied articles and publications accumulated since the fall of Ceaușescu's dictatorship, and housed in her studio. If Rosler's library has an interdisciplinary outlook and a double function (it's both a reading room, and overcomes her problem of no storage space in New York), then Perjovschi's room provides a resource on contemporary art that doesn't exist anywhere else in Bucharest; she particularly welcomes students from the Academy (located in the neighbourhood of her studio), where conceptual and performance practices are still not taught. In the midst of New York's cultural over-availability, there is a risk that Rosler's library ends up as a portrait of the artist, a sculpture that gains in meaning if you already know her work.⁶⁵ For Perjovschi, by contrast, the act of assembling this information is at the same time a continuation of her practice, as seen in her drawings that map ideas and references autodidactically culled from Eastern and Western European sources, and a collective resource for young artists in Bucharest. The point here is not to argue that Rosler or Perjovschi offers the better project, since the contexts are barely comparable. The point is that pedagogic projects respond to the different urgencies of their moment, even while both offer a reflection on disciplinarity, functionality, and the role of research within art.

VI. Aesthetic Education

It would be an oversight to conclude this chapter without considering art itself as a form of education, regardless of its form or medium. Friedrich Schiller's twenty-eight *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* were published in 1795, partly in response to what Schiller perceived as the barbarisms of the French Revolution. The struggle of the French people for human rights and political freedom had led, in his eyes, not to a reign of freedom and humanity, but to violence and terror. A problem of political education became for Schiller the problem of human progress in general; caught between a 'state of nature' (physical drives) and a 'state of reason' (cool rationality), man could, he argued, find a path to moral betterment through aesthetic education. In making this argument, Schiller took issue with Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790), in particular with his theory of disinterested beauty removed from bodily urges and in turn submitted to the rigours of Kant's transcendental method. For Schiller, Kant's approach belied the profound connection between art and individual drives: to educate the viewer, he argued, art had to keep a connection with the bodily chaos it claimed to conquer, not remain at one remove from it. If Kant had proposed a separation of the faculties, each articulated differently according to its realm (the moral, the rational, or the aesthetic), Schiller emphasised a binary opposition (the physical and the intellectual) and turned it into