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TEACHING ART: ADORNO AND THE DEVIL

Daniel Birnbaum

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I: *One could know all that and yet acknowledge freedom again beyond criticism. One could raise the game to a yet higher power by playing with forms from which, as one knows, life has vanished.*

HE: *I know. I know. Parody. It might be merry if in its aristocratic nihilism it were not so very woebegone. Do you think such tricks promise you much happiness and greatness?*

I: *(repost angrily) No.*

—Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*

Daniel Birnbaum

I: The same story appears over and over again in the annals of Zen Buddhism: The student comes to the teacher and begs him for instruction. The teacher says nothing; he is just sweeping up leaves. The student goes into another part of the forest and builds his own house, and when he is finally educated, what does he do? He doesn't thank himself; he goes back to the teacher who said nothing and thanks him. It is this spirit of not teaching that has been completely lost in our educational system, says John Cage.

HE: And you agree?

I: Well, art is taught. But nobody seems to know how.

HE: And yet people like you keep doing it for years. Isn't that hypocritical, even cynical?

I: "I don't think art can be taught. I really don't," says John Baldessari in an interview our students made with him recently. We printed it in a book called *Kunst Lehren/Teaching Art*, which seemed a bit paradoxical perhaps. I don't think one could call John a cynic. He seems to me a deeply optimistic person, and he has been teaching art, whatever that may mean, for half a century, so his account is probably realistic: "I do think that one of the advantages of an art school is that the student gets to meet artists, other artists that are practicing."[1]

HE: And what exactly would be the point of meeting artists?

I: Baldessari continues: "The value of that is they see that the artists are humans; art isn't something esoteric that's in books and magazines and museums, it's done by real people, and sometimes they're real jerks, and sometimes they're very articulate, sometimes they can't barely get two words out. Sometimes they do a lot of garbage, sometimes they do a lot of good work. But at least the students get exposed to that." And yet he insists, "But, no, I don't think you can teach art at all."

HE: So perhaps we should end the conversation here.

I: Well, perhaps there are a few other approaches. Some artists who teach emphasize the importance of unlearning things, of removing the kitsch and the clichés about art and the role of the artist as a first necessary step, followed by something constructive that is much harder to specify. "Ignorance is a treasure of infinite price," says Paul Valéry. Tobias Rehberger, who is one of the best teachers I know, is optimistic enough to think that removing the layers of sediment will set more interesting things free.

HE: One of the best teachers? That you have to explain.

I: Well, there are lots of great young artists coming out of his class. He says: "You have to surprise me. You have to go beyond what I'm telling you. Otherwise you can only reach my level, and that is not very interesting because you are already there." And 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 automatically get there." This is probably largely the kind of optimism that is necessary for everyone who works in education, but it is also a way of teaching that insists on the necessity of an individual cure.

HE: Okay, but let me ask you a few questions about a disturbing tension, an irritating contradiction, in what you keep saying about schools and about teaching art, which, after all, has been your profession for years now. You claim things like this: "We should remember that every school is a temporary space intended to give young artists the theoretical and practical tools 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."

I: Yes. Where is the problem?

HE: No problem with that, really, but on the other hand, you talk about the school as a production site, and sometimes you make it sound as if the academy could be a curatorial model.

I: Well, that is really nothing new. Do you know Robert Filliou's *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*?[2]

HE: The book edited by Kasper König in 1970.

I: Yes, it's an interactive book in the sense that there are lots of blank spaces where the reader, "if he wishes," as the author puts it, can contribute his own thoughts. John Cage plays a major role in the book, and the Zen story above is quoted there. He also says: "I think, first of all, we need a situation in which nothing is being transmitted: no one is learning anything that was learned before. They must be learning things that were, until this situation arose, so to speak, unknown or unknowable."

HE: If teaching and learning are performance arts, then the collective zone in which these creative activities take place is a kind of stage or even an exhibit. Does that make any sense today?

I: Well, the Städelschule in Frankfurt is an art school with a Kunsthalle, the Portikus. The hybridity arising by virtue of the proximity of education, production, and display has made it an interesting location for collective productions.

HE: For instance?

I: All kinds of things instigated by both teachers and visiting artists: from the renderings by students of Yoko Ono's almost haiku-like "instruction pieces" to a colorful and pretty wild parade organized by Arto Lindsay, the rock musician; from Rirkrit Tiravanija, Pierre Huyghe, and art historian Pamela M. Lee's installation of a Gordon Matta-Clark show inside a house built from a few hundred large loaves of bread baked by students—our school has a cooking class—to John Bock's real collision of disciplines, wherein he screened a new film onto a baroque structure designed by architect Ben van Berkel. A school is a school, but it can also be an unusually energetic production site of art that finds new forms of visibility and new forms of display.

HE: That's the problem: you say that a school is a school, and that the students' capacity to navigate is what is most central. But on the other hand, it seems that you use—or should I even say abuse?—the students, as if they were simply material in some kind of living *Gesamtkunstwerk* that you construct together with all kinds of artists you invite.

I: Let's take a closer look at one example: The first new teacher I invited to the school was Rirkrit. Over the course of two years, 2001 and 2002, he did three things: he taught at the school (which in his case means that we met, 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 we all 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 *gasthof*, as the event was called. Together with students from the Städelschule, 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. Do you think that these activities represent a kind of abuse?

HE: Well, did not Tiravanija—with your eager support—try to turn the entire school into a work of art?

I: I really don't know how to answer that.

HE: That is certainly how some people saw it—not merely because claiming the production site itself as a work of art seems the logical consequence of many recent developments in contemporary art but because Gasthof seemed to represent the very essence of that art that Nicolas Bourriaud christened "relational aesthetics" in the 1990s. And that is a problem!

I: What exactly is the problem with that?

HE: For Tiravanija and other "relational" artists that Bourriaud discussed, social exchange is not just a side effect or 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. The problem of course is this: the students are at school to develop their skills, not in order to realize your or anyone else's curatorial ambitions. It might be quite pleasant and even lots of fun to march in Art Lindsay's parade or to cook with Rirkrit, but that is not what becoming an artist is about.

I: So what *is* it about?

HE: It's about learning to use the theoretical and practical tools required to navigate an ever-changing now. Didn't you just say that yourself?

I: But perhaps Gasthof, 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. It's not really my fault that some people interpret it as a collective work of art.

HE: Don't pretend to be innocent. When a similar project, involving many of the same people, was presented as an exhibition called Utopia Station at the 2003 Venice Biennale—organized by Tiravanija with Molly Nesbit and Hans Ulrich Obrist—there was really no question about whether it was a show.

I: Wait a second: At Gasthof everybody present was part of the gig, so perhaps it wasn't a show after all. Utopia Station, by contrast, introduced collective production 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 only one of the possible ways of understanding the situation. Is it not interesting that it seems increasingly difficult to draw a line between shows and education? Perhaps this is more relevant for an assessment of the state of art itself than for a discussion of schools . . .

HE: . . . whose primary purpose, let me emphasize this, remains to educate students and not to put them—or itself—on display. So what does this say about the state of art itself?

I: That you get the art you deserve.

HE: Well, perhaps you get the schools you deserve. In order to gain some perspective on the question of the educational institution's relationship to art here, 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 Bauhaus model, with its emphasis on creativity rather than talent.

I: The description of the modernist art school based on the creative individual is convincing. The cult of creativity is grounded in a utopian belief that is summed up in the modernist slogan: everyone is an artist. As de Duve points out, one finds this throughout the history of modernity, from Rimbaud to Beuys.

HE: The Bauhaus stressed the qualities inherent to a medium rather than artistic techniques, invention rather than imitation, and creativity rather than talent, which had been typical of the "academic model." De Duve writes, for example: "The difference between talent and creativity is that the former is unequally distributed and the latter universally."[3] But today, he says, these key concepts—creativity, medium, invention—have been hollowed out by theory-based programs that stress attitude, practice, deconstruction. Do you agree with this account?

I: No. I think that perhaps the Whitney program in New York came close to this for awhile. If you have read and assimilated Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, perhaps these concepts, especially practice and deconstruction, sum up what you think about cultural production rather well. But most art schools in Europe, and in the United States, as well, I think, have been more eclectic in their approach. Of course, nobody is supposed to believe in old-fashioned expressionist subjectivity, but some stage it so wholeheartedly and so convincingly that they tend to forget that it's not the real thing. Is Jonathan Meese creative, or is it all just a pose—I don't think he knows that himself, and he doesn't want to know.

HE: It's just a question of . . .

I: . . . attitude. That sounds like the young artists of the Städelschule to me, I'm afraid. But what's so bad about attitude and deconstruction?

HE: De Duve claims that although such an approach has produced some good artworks, it makes for bad art schools that are, as he puts it, "the disenchanted, perhaps nihilistic, afterimage of the old Bauhaus paradigm."[4] We all seem to work in the aftermath of a time with more powerful ideas.

I: Actually, I think we live and work in many different times, and that the asynchronic nature of our moment can be rather productive.

HE: How do you mean that?

I: Nobody believes in medium specificity, that is true, but nobody believes in the values of the old academy either. Students are torn between incompatible worlds, whether they realize it or not, and sometimes this schizophrenic condition can be a good place to be. We live in an asynchronic moment when the old academy, the modernist model, and the deconstructive afterimages live side by side in a world increasingly driven by market interests.

HE: So all those tools are good as long as they can be made productive in the art market?

I: No, no, that's not what I mean. One has to ask: Should the art school turn itself into a monastery that protects students from the evil forces outside or should it invite the market in and become a kind of lively bazaar? It seems to me that the answer is neither and both. The pressures of the outside world no doubt bear within the school too, and the idea of an inside and an outside is probably too simplistic. What is "out there" can be of interest for pedagogical reasons. It's a question of perspective rather than of content.

HE: You mean that the students should study the market but not be part of it?

I: Well, sooner or later they will be part of it, so perhaps it's important to understand a few things about the forces involved.

HE: Perhaps you could specify what you mean by market.

I: I think that at least two kinds of market should be distinguished when we talk about art education. On the one hand, there is the commercial interest in very young artists' work, indeed even in works by students. On the other hand, there is a different economy that is relevant: education is today a hot commodity. Education is capital. And, as Jan Verwoert has spelled out recently, capital must keep circulating. Hence the Bologna Process. He writes: "The [Bologna] accords aim to introduce unified standards for evaluating the education at institutions of higher education all over Europe. There is an economic purpose to this: in order for education as a commodity to circulate, measures must be taken to ensure that its value is calculated everywhere according to the same pay scale."[5] Thus, the Bologna Process represents the comprehensive subjection of education in Europe to economic terms.

HE: But that is a different theme altogether.

I: True, but perhaps it is important to remember that there are different economies involved when talking about art education, not only the one that involves the money exchanged by dealers, artists, and collectors.

HE: And what really is the main problem with the standardization implied by the Bologna Process?

HE: If one is interested in diversity and plurality in the arts, or in culture in general, I think it's important to challenge this leveling process. More than most other institutions, art schools are always local. No matter how large and international the city, the local art academy will always display features that one cannot find in other places, and this is probably quite natural. Who, if not the young artists studying in a city and the professors teaching them year after year, should define the local art situation?

HE: So what was typical of the Städelschule, and which original features appeared worthwhile cultivating when you first came there?

I: Some characteristics immediately stood out: No other art school I know of has a kitchen next to the administrative director's office and takes cooking as seriously. That seemed peculiar and interesting enough to cultivate. And no other art school I am aware of has an exhibition program as ambitious as that of Portikus. I did know a few young artists who had come out of the school, but what about the teaching itself? Was there a pedagogical program, even an educational philosophy?

HE: More important: Do you have one now?

I: In the end, it's all about individual artists. It was and still is impossible to reduce the teaching taking place here to any kind of doctrine because the school has always been centered on the input from a small number of strong teachers, each with different, sometimes opposing, views on what art (and architecture) is all about—from Thomas Bayrle, Peter Cook, Hermann Nitsch in the recent past, to people like Ben van Berkel, Isabelle Graw, Michael Krebber, Tobias Rehberger, Martha Rosler, Simon Starling, and Wolfgang Tillmans today.

HE: That's disappointing. No program.

I: Of course someone like Isabelle Graw builds a program, since she prefers to read certain very specific things with the students. They read Jacques Rancière and Theodor W. Adorno, so there is a certain direction. But it really depends on who is teaching at the moment. Together with their students, these individuals define what the school is. Doing that, they take plenty of liberties, and my true belief is that this freedom is what is most important. What they offer is not only their experience and their skills, but ultimately something even more significant: themselves as examples of what it is to be an artist today.

HE: Total pluralism?

I: No, but the individual artist is more important than any educational program or doctrine. A successful art school must involve important artists, as Baldessari has often insisted. A great faculty attracts interesting students, who teach each other. It's about participating in a collective sphere of challenging and critical exchange rather than being taught specific techniques (even if knowing certain techniques can be helpful).

HE: And how do you know if what you are doing is successful?

I: I guess it's all about the artists who come out of the program in the end. Strangely enough, some of the most famous programs had incredibly prominent teachers but few interesting graduates—the Bauhaus, for instance.

HE: So the commercial success of the graduates is what counts? Should there be courses in how to promote oneself?

I: That's not what I'm talking about. But if you are an artist today, it could perhaps be of importance to be aware of those violent, sexual, and sometimes uncanny forces that turn the commercial art world into a stage for fetishistic desires and excess rather than a platform for sober exchange.

HE: The capacity to navigate an ever-changing and increasingly commercialized world on one's own requires theoretical and practical tools. Isn't it time you spell out what these are? If you aren't happy with de Duve's "attitude, practice, deconstruction," then I suggest you come up with a more relevant trinity of concepts.

I: So there has to be a three-step dialectic?

HE: What about hospitality, collaboration, exchange? That at least seems to sum up what you've been up to in the past decade.

I: That sounds nice. But I'm not sure that those aren't simply concepts that neatly sum up what happens in any educational institution that allows, or even emphasizes, a collaborative mode of research and production. The interesting thing is perhaps that the art world in its entirety has moved toward these structures typical of schools.

HE: Is that really something new? Some kinds of art are possible only at art schools. Think of many of the Fluxus events, or the party in 1966 organized by John Latham and his student Barry Flanagan at which guests chewed up pages from the library copy of Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* at St. Martin's School of Art in London.

I: True. De Duve mentions this happening as a symbolic marker of the radical redirection of the art school toward Conceptualism—as well as toward innovation and subversion—which took the place of formalism and modernism in the teaching of art. Latham was fired after he attempted to return to the library a liquid made by fermenting the paper and saliva in place of the book. Today, de Duve asserts, an artist "could do the same performance with the principal's blessing, and the librarian wouldn't even bother to reorder *Art and Culture*."[6]

HE: So it's not new, after all?

I: Well, think of Stockholm's Moderna Museet during the 1960s. That was probably Europe's most daringly experimental museum, with initiatives such as "Poetry Must Be Made by All! Transform the World!" (1969), a show about gestures of radical politics that, instead of original artworks, presented documentation and happenings such as visits from American draft dodgers and Black Panthers, as well as free-jazz sessions inside a replica of Tatlin's Tower. But still, no one would have said that they were in school. Back then, that probably sounded boring. For some mysterious reason, school now has become something appealing.

HE: This announcement recently reached me: "Night School is an artist commission in the form of a temporary school. For this project, artist Anton Vidokle is organizing a yearlong program of monthly seminars and workshops that use the New Museum as a site to shape a critically engaged public through art discourse." One wonders: Why does a major museum get involved in this kind of thing? Shouldn't a museum concentrate on exhibitions and leave education to the academy?

I: Part of the explanation is perhaps that the highly commercialized art world has become a bit gray and monotonous. Where do we find challenging spaces for artistic experimentation today? Certainly not in the corporate museum, the art fair, or in the global circuit of blockbuster shows that are expected to attract mass audiences. It would seem that the interest in the art school among curators has to do with a certain crisis in the world of exhibition making as we knew it. The global cultural industry is increasingly ruthless in its logic of commodification, and curators across the globe are desperately trying to dodge the reductive language of bureaucrats and marketing people simply to get space to breathe. There must be some alternative to the biennial model, which is too closely linked to issues of tourism and city branding and to the blockbuster spectacle: *MoMA in Berlin = 1 million tickets sold!*

HE: And yet this new popularity can seem strange, since concepts such as "school" and "academy" rarely sparked enthusiasm in progressive circles in previous decades. Asked if the Black Mountain College was to be an art school, founder 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 schools, German painter Gerhard Richter in 1983 explained that the most gruesome aspect of our misery is to be found in the 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."[7]

I: But things have obviously changed, and "school" has become an attractive thing.

HE: Perhaps too attractive a thing?

I: It triggers a lot of art world excitement, and historical precedents for alternative art education—the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Pontus Hultén and Daniel Buren's short-lived Insitut 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 in Staffordshire—are being dug out of the gray and dusty archives. Suddenly all of this seems fascinating and full of promise. Anton Vidokle's New York project for 2008 will probably be the most visible example in a line of recent endeavors. Vidokle and his colleagues initiated research into education as a site for artistic practice for Manifesta 6, which was cancelled. In response to the cancellation, Vidokle set up an independent project in Berlin called Unitednationsplaza—described as "a twelve-month project involving more than a hundred artists, writers, philosophers, and diverse audiences."

HE: Just wait until these people rediscover Robert Filliou's *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts* and its vision of mankind as a source of continuous and all-encompassing collective creativity.[7]

I: That's when we will finally long for an old-style academism and the reintroduction of strict rules.

HE: That's an easy way out. Isn't there a more positive way forward, into the future, rather than returning to conventions that nobody believes in?

I: Perhaps. Recently, I witnessed an unconventional 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 musicology. The day before, a symposium had taken place in the garden, involving an Icelandic violin maker, various artists and writers, and Sanford Kwinter, 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.

HE: But the people at the studio are assistants, not students.

I: A number of great young artists have worked for Eliasson; some, such as Jeppe Hein and Tomas 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.

HE: So new technologies offer new modes of creation and research.

I: Yes, but now it is no longer a problem how to get the information. The problem is what to do with it and how to navigate on your own.

HE: So this is the future: reflection, navigation, creation.

I: Hmm, creation. Okay I could accept that.

HE: Nam June Paik's 1971 contribution to the German journal *Interfunktionen*, "Expanded Education for the Paperless Society," starts with a note on what he calls great thinkers: "It is a blunder, bordering on a miracle, that we have no, or very few, images and voices of the great thinkers of the recent past on record."[8] Where, asks Paik, are Edmund Husserl, Sigmund Freud, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Wassily Kandinsky, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ludwig Wittgenstein? Why do we not have documentation of these influential people speaking about their work? This blunder, a negative miracle according to Paik, is the biggest waste of instructional resources, and nothing is more urgent than documents of the major thinkers of today. Has Paik's vision become reality now that you can listen to Foucault, Adorno, Derrida, and Chomsky on YouTube at your kitchen table?

I: Well, the kitchen tables in Shanghai and Reykjavik provide the same philosophical information. That is new. Which makes even more evident what has been the case all along: the question is how you assimilate the information and make it into meaningful knowledge for yourself. In the end you have to navigate on your own.

HE: You once formulated a retroactive manifesto for the school you are running. Do you still believe in it, or is it a parody, playing with forms from which life has vanished like the devil in *Doctor Faustus* would say, quoting extensively from Adorno?

I: That I leave to others to decide.

HE: So spell out your seven words of wisdom.

I:

"Ignorance is a treasure of infinite price" (Paul Valéry). Most of us have a lot to unlearn.

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.

Wonderful things can happen between disciplines, but you don't need to tear down the walls. There are doors. (Just leave them unlocked.)

Something happens to a thing when it's displayed. An art school is not an exhibition, but students should be close to exhibitions.

Food can be as important as philosophy. The best teaching may happen during meals. (A good canteen is helpful.)

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.

There is never just one way to do art. John Baldessari and Thomas Bayrle (my heroes) have shown this in their teaching, and their students around the world keep proving it. As Wittgenstein made clear, what can be shown cannot be said: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Just do it!

HE: Anything missing?

I: Perhaps the school can be a ladder: one that is thrown away once it has been climbed.