

An aesthetic education against aesthetic education

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Documenta 12's commitment to the question of what is to be done in education is to be welcomed from an institution that has sought to sustain itself as an autonomous cultural realm, a public sphere, in the face of its fabulous state sponsorship and relations to the art market. The articulation of the question in terms of the self-education of artists and audiences and a globalized cultural translation of localized forms of self-organization broadens its address. In the context of the uneven globalization of cultural centres, manifest in the blossoming of biennales from Istanbul to Johannesburg and Seoul, the old school of international art exhibitions is obliged to respond not only to one or other of these newcomers, but to the fact of their profusion and their representation as the authentically subaltern. In this respect, Documenta 12's proposal of itself as the stage for exchanging local, self-organized projects is a way of sustaining its global significance as an organizational centre in an artworld that has become increasingly decentred. Its benevolence is thus liable to a quasi-imperial perversion, the irony of multitude and empire.

The conservative reaction to Documenta 11's commitment to postcoloniality was more parochial and short-sighted – 'Documenta' has subsequently become an answer in Germany's citizenship test for immigrants. Documenta 12's project of a 'journal of journals' is itself liable to this colonizing function. Journals are invited to a global exchange and translation of their 'position', hosted in a virtual but no less codified space. But an intranet and copyfree rights are hardly enough to retain the dream of a republic of letters here. Participation in the best intentions of this project therefore needs to question its terms of exchange. Having been offered citizenship of Documenta 12, one is perhaps obliged to try to fail its test and answer its question by criticizing it.

The devil in the deep blue sea

To say that education is a constitutive issue of contemporary culture is to risk tautology, especially in German. The implicit claim that 'culture is education' only sounds true when it is heard not as a translation but

as a speculative proposition, determined by an antagonism between the terms that is also within each of them. These antagonisms have become familiar within modernism, the culture of the new. The dissolution of traditional, dogmatic or externally imposed authority problematizes the idea of education – how can freedom be taught? – orienting it towards autonomy and self-organization. But the contradictions harboured by the idea of an education in freedom manifest themselves in the ironic formation of new modes of dogmatism, above all the neo-dogmatism of the law of value. These issues have not become antiquated by the globalized scenario emphasized by Documenta, except in so far as one might characterize the present as a classicism of antagonism. The artistic director of Documenta 12 claims: 'Today, education seems to offer one viable alternative to the devil (didacticism, academia) and the deep blue sea (commodity fetishism).' This is wishful thinking. It is difficult not to be struck by a certain educationalization of contemporary culture that is characterized above all by the *fusion* of didacticism and commodification.

Meritocracy – certainly among the neoliberalized social democracies of Europe – is among the preferred means of mediating democracy and capitalism. British prime minister Tony Blair's trinity is 'education, education, education'. 'Lifelong learning' is a phrase that oscillates between the dream of fulfilling self-transformation beyond the privileges of youth, and the nightmare of indiscriminate de-skilling and re-skilling according to the dictates of a 'flexible' labour market. Many are left dumbfounded by the breathless, exponential pace at which education at all levels is being commodified. The liberation of 'choice' and 'opportunity' is the carrot; the stick is the threat of deserved poverty, whether of the nation or the individual. This threat infuses the political discipline of states seeking technological sovereignty, but the de-nationalization of labour markets has added a further dictate: your nationality will no longer save you from poverty, only your education will. The expansion of postgraduate degrees – note the contradiction in terms – is fraught with tensions between widened accessibility to more

self-directed study and the instrumentalization of higher education into training or research guided by state- or corporate-funded interests, if not its indiscriminate commodification as a leisure industry, often misrecognized by those seeking a job in academia. Qualification is a receding horizon; its promise of maturity takes the form of infantilization.

Art education is not exempt from these phenomena, despite its exemplary resistance to them in many ways. Often it is an exception and derided as such, as not 'an education', or as an 'education for failures', the uneducated and the ineducable. But what appears to be infantile to the schoolmarmish can be, at its best, an assumption of autonomy, rather than its deferral or evasion: one begins as already an artist in a way that few other disciplines can even comprehend, let alone match. This infuses the auto-didacticism of the art-school intellectual. It might be difficult to recognize among the fat-and-felt mythology, but Beuys's thesis that 'everyone is an artist' remains a pivotal contention of modern art education, the self-critical and even self-negating task of the art school. Of course, the irony of this educational radicalism has frequently been an undisciplined demagoguery. Few manifest this more powerfully than Beuys himself. And while the public fascination and scandal with contemporary art is infused by the idea that 'I could do that', the artworld remains dominated by graduates from select academies. Art schools are certainly brand names in the market for young artists.

The dismantling of academicism within the art academy – the undermining of the strict observance of genres and arts, of artistic competence and authorship, indeed, of what art should be – mimics, albeit at times critically, the nominalism of new processes of the commodification of labour and their protocols. A neo-academic tendency is also apparent in the pervasive criticism of the supposedly 'uneducated' capacities of taste and genius – of their actual education by social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or other determinations – which is indifferent to how taste and genius contribute to the cultivation of non-dogmatic forms of authority and self-determination. If they can be seen as effects of commodity fetishism, their dissolution into the determinability of social space and identity is no less symptomatic of the calculation of consumer markets. The theoreticization of art practice and education that has accompanied this sociologically reductive tendency is frequently entranced with academicism. 'Theory' has proven to make just as good packaging as the connoisseurial puff. Criticism is the antidote to both.

Exhibition space has been widely transformed over the recent period according to a similarly ambivalent pedagogy, with various 'aids' to mediate the audience's experience of the artwork, from ubiquitous and expanded catalogues, to orienting wall texts and audio guides, audience-response forms and posting boards. The whitewashing of artspace for the unaided exercise of taste is being reversed. Even where art is sold as an experience, an encounter with something unknown, there is usually a guide on hand. Within underresourced public spaces, education offers a respectable merchandising opportunity.

Documenta 12's appeal to self-organized educational projects that offer an alternative to academicism/didacticism and commodity fetishism suppresses the extent to which the modern idea of education is embedded within these terms. Indeed, they infuse the contradictions in the very idea of education as emancipation. Commitment to this idea thus requires its immanent critique. How else could an injunction to education today be formulated?

Lessons in autonomy

It was perhaps above all the modern political-philosophical idea of autonomy, codified by the French Revolution and its German *philosophes*, which induced the crisis and reinvention of the idea of education that continues into the present. The French Revolution grounded freedom on equality, as an inalienable right, introduced in the form or guise of 'man'. Equality is not derived from freedom in the manner of the aristocratic democracies of antiquity, in which equality is a category of distinction, of an elite. Rather, the modern idea of autonomy requires a coincidence of freedom and equality: equality without freedom is subordination; freedom without equality is privileged, particular and therefore constrained. This mediation infuses a non-dogmatic idea of law: freedom must be subject to universal law as a guarantor of its equality, but law must also be subject to freedom; it cannot be unchallengeable by the individual. The idea of autonomy resolves this tension into the idea of individuals determining themselves according to universal laws to which they subject themselves with the inalienable or natural capacity they have as subjects. Thus Kant argues that the moral law expresses nothing other than the autonomy of pure practical reason – that is, freedom. One is not subjected to dogmatic or externally imposed rules – heteronomy – but to the rules one gives to oneself as a subject. Autonomy is therefore a unity of subjection and subjectivity.

This idea of autonomy produces a crisis and reinvention of the idea of education. For if education is essentially a relation of subjection – of student by master – then it is incompatible with the constitution of autonomy. Even if education means merely the transmission of something from those who have it to those who do not, how can there be an education in autonomy? Autonomy is not owned or understood by certain beings such that it can be transmitted to others who do not possess it. It is an egalitarian presupposition of any such exchange. As such, education is best left behind in the seminary or reduced to a minor or subordinate cultural function incidental to forging a culture of autonomy. These problems justify various forms of anti-education, attached to the natural, the naïve and the untrained or perhaps self-trained, for which Rousseau provides the slogan: ‘Man was born free, and yet everywhere he is in chains.’ And yet this idea of anti-education also induced ideas of an education against education, proposals for the paradoxical task of an education in autonomy. Rousseau’s *Émile, or On Education* has his Savoyard vicar profess a faith in ‘common reason’ to his young companion rather than conduct ‘learned speeches or profound reasonings’: ‘I do not want to argue with you or even convince you.... Reason is common to us, and we have the same interest in listening to it.’¹ Kant, famously enthused by this peculiar education, conceived of enlightenment as a matter of courage: ‘Have courage to use your own understanding!’² Finally, Joseph Jacotot’s universal teaching, cited by Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, articulates the paradoxical principle of an education against education most succinctly: ‘I must teach you that I have nothing to teach you.’³

Socrates’ insistence that he knew nothing more than his interlocutors and that they should enter into the search for truth together, as equals, established a pedagogic precedent for education in autonomy to become essential to the idea of philosophy, opposed not only to sophistry but also to the inculcation of doctrine. But Socrates remains the master, followed and admired, contradicted by his pupils on pain of misleading themselves, the hero or sovereign of Plato’s dialogues. His students remain students. Meno’s slave is brought to know what is forgotten within him, what appears to be a capacity above his rank, but in being brought to that point he remains subjected in reaching it. He remains a slave. The lesson to Socrates’ select pupils, certainly to Plato, is to establish them in their superiority, as those ‘golden’ boys, philosophers and thereby rulers, of the serried ranks beneath them. It is the promise of sovereignty through subjection. But

subjection remains subjection, if not to Socrates then to ‘the forms’. Sovereignty is reduced to compensation for one’s subjection by the subjection of others. If the idea of philosophy is intrinsically tied to this education in subjection, then we need to think of an education in autonomy as forging an alternative discipline or anti-discipline.

The contradictoriness of an education in autonomy should not be overstated, in so far as if freedom is subject to equality – albeit as much as equality is to freedom – then the subjecting function of education might be conceived according to the discipline required of freedom. But this only extends the crisis of education to the idea of autonomy itself, exposing an essentially disciplinary sense of autonomy as a concept of rule or domination. Freedom is conceived as the domination of oneself. One becomes free through subjecting oneself to oneself, as if two subjections emancipate a subject. The educational hero of autonomy names this well, the autodidact. Thus, the unity of equality and freedom is rendered essentially and necessarily antagonistic, as the unity of competing rules. It is as an alternative to this dominative and antagonistic conception of autonomy, and its education, that the idea of an aesthetic education acquires a decisive significance. The rule-like but non-ruling character of various features of making and experiencing art renders them exemplary for thinking of a non-dominative, non-antagonistic unity of freedom and equality – for instance, the extent to which taste can be agreed upon despite not resulting from obedience to a rule. Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* is the most conspicuous attempt to draw out the significance of the eighteenth-century discourse on taste and the beautiful for an education in autonomy.

Freedom with sense

Schiller maintains the idea that freedom cannot be learnt. Aesthetic education teaches the already free, although what is at issue here is not courage but the ‘realization’ of freedom in another sense, its actualization. This involves a disciplining of sorts, but through beauty, not law, and through harmony or affinity, not domination. An education in autonomy is reoriented towards that which follows no rules and gives no rules, and yet is not antagonistic or chaotic: the beautiful artwork. Autonomy is not thought in terms of self-government or self-ruling, so much as the suspension of rules. The inculcation or giving of rules, indeed the whole ethos of discipline, is displaced by play. The modern anthropology of autonomy becomes a discourse of play: ‘man only plays when he is in the

fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays'. *Homo ludens*. It is as such that the beautiful provides the model for a free community, the 'aesthetic state'. Aesthetic education is conceived as an antidote to the pathologies of the neo-dogmatism of reason and its idea of freedom, principally its abstractness or indifference to sensuous particularity, and the splits and alienations this generates – in short, the formalism, mechanism and alienating specialization of the modern state, as opposed to the polypoid state that Schiller derives from Greek antiquity, in which 'every individual enjoyed an independent existence but could, when need arose, grow into the whole organism'.⁴ Objections to Schiller's bourgeois classicism are familiar but reductive. Schiller does not propose that the 'aesthetic state' simply returns the 'moral state' to a 'natural state', but that it realizes a free community by overcoming the opposition of morality to nature. Nor does Schiller abandon a commitment to equality in his insistence of the mediation of freedom with sense. Rather the sensuous manifold becomes a radicalization of the determination of freedom by equality: that all are free in their particularity rather than just in their universality. Schiller emphasizes a latent dogmatism in freedom's domination of nature, sensibility, felt at the heart of self-determination. Despite the consensual impression of this politics of beauty, the category of the beautiful proposes a far more challenging unity of freedom and sensibility than does the sublime, which – at least in Kant – is the experience of freedom from sense.

With Schiller, the modern political ontology of autonomy comes to rest on an education in beautiful or fine art. He provides a manifesto for the historical avant-gardes, and not only with respect to what they seek to overcome. And through them, such an education is extended into the terms of contemporary art. But our distance from Schiller is measured by his naivety with respect to the commodification of culture. This is not to say that the idea of aesthetic education does not infuse the critique of capitalism. Indeed, Marx's critique of the value form – its abstraction from the particularity of use – can be understood as transposing Schiller's critique of the dominance of form over sense. Marx's recovery of living labour from capital, as dead labour, reiterates Schiller's conception of the beautiful as living form, as opposed to the lifeless form of 'modern man'. Communism is an aesthetic state for Marx, also modelled in the artwork. Capitalism is a pathological rationalism, a dominative mode of autonomy, in which humanity's autonomy is alienated. The law of value is precisely a neo-dogmatic authority,

emerging from within the project to overcome natural or feudal forms of subjection, to which aesthetic education offers an alternative model.

But the attempt to conceive of the critique of capitalism in terms of an aesthetic education is complicated in so far as capitalist culture itself has affinities with the 'aesthetic state'. The value form may abstract from the particularity of labour and its products, but in so doing it also forms them according to the accumulation of surplus value, generating not only value or money, or even an economy, but a capitalist society: capitalism as a whole way of life. This induces a new anthropology of autonomy. The supersensuous sensibility of beauty is reproduced in the supersensuous sensibility of the commodity fetish together with its apprehension through taste. For Schiller, beauty is sense apprehended from the standpoint of the moral law; for Marx, commodity fetishism is sense apprehended from the standpoint of the law of value. The idea of aesthetic education appears to have turned against itself, as if it were an antidote that produced its own poison.

The contention here is not that Schiller or Marx offers a forgotten answer to the question of education today, but rather that they introduce the problem that still needs to be addressed: namely, the constitution of aesthetic education as both the critique and the embodiment of a neo-dogmatism of the law of value. This problem infuses, more or less consciously, current debates about the ontology of art, in particular the conflict between the anti-aestheticism generated by conceptualism and the neo-aestheticism that has emerged in reaction to it. Contemporary art's constitution by this conflict over aesthetics enables it to reflect the profound ambivalence of an aesthetic education in a way that it could not do if it were limited to the aesthetic or, for that matter, to taste and the beautiful. As such, art becomes the location of an immanent critique of aesthetic education, an aesthetic education against aesthetic education. This would form a lesson in emancipation.

Notes

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or On Education* (1762), trans. Allan Bloom, Basic Books, New York, 1979, p. 266.
2. Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' (1784), in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey, Hackett, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1983, p. 41.
3. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, trans. Kristin Ross, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1991, p. 15.
4. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), trans. E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967, 1982, pp. 107, 35.