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Academy as Potentiality

Right now

Occasionally in class I find myself saying, "I have no Idea", to my slightly disbelieving students. This is not a false profession of ignorance or an unbecoming modesty but a genuine expression of the fact that I do not know, in terms of structured knowledge, how to get to where I need to be. It seems to me that the urgent questions and the bodies of knowledge I have at my disposal do not tally and produce a route by which issues, arguments and modes of operating, merge seamlessly. And so it would seem that the task of 'academy', of education, is not to affect this seamless merger but to understand this productive disjuncture and its creative possibilities. That subjects and knowledges do not live in a simple state of productive harmony, is the unspoken dimension of the contemporary debate on education, unspoken because it counters the aims to uniformly instrumentalise education towards a set of predetermined outcomes. As inhabitants of these spaces and atmospheres of 'academy' we are forever caught in a, hopefully productive, tension between knowing where we might want to go, being empowered by the sense that we have every right to embark on this journey and equally being aware that we might lack the tools we need or the strength of spirit demanded by any journey into unknown territory. This "I Can/I Can't" dilemma is at the heart of my understanding of 'Academy as Potentiality' which I hope to unfold here.

Perhaps for the sake of clarity I should say that throughout this text, I have collapsed notions of learning spaces and exhibiting spaces. While they may belong to different institutional orders, with different funding sources, employing differently trained professionals, with different expected outcomes etc', the project at hand — 'academy'— is working to refract them through one another.

It seems everyone today is up in arms about education. Not since the mid 20th century has education reform been so contentious, so invested with drives towards an assumed efficiency on the one hand, countered by drives to safeguard a seeming freedom to speculate on the other. A rather weird war has come about in which those who want to maintain 'meaning-led education' engage with those who want to police and invigilate its forms and structures with much regard for its effectiveness and little regard for its content or more importantly, for what it might make possible. Education in general and 'academy' in particular are the metaphors being used, and occasionally over used, to wrestle with all that is wrong and all that might be possible, in gaining access to the urgent and important issues of our day. Overall there is much gloom, disappointment and fear, yet here and there, in tiny marginal pockets, there is also an odd kind of optimism surrounding this energetic debate or as Homi Bhabha said a long time ago "*In every emergency, there is also an emergence*". Were this not the case, were education not imbued with some sense

Courtesy of the author

Geographies and Spatial Practices workshop held in the context of the Venice Architecture Biennal 2006 for the joint group of students from Goldsmiths College and ETH Basle.

of possibility, we would not have so many exhibition initiatives that take up notions of research, of laboratory, of learning and of teaching as their format. In an odd way, the massive initiative of 'Bologna' and the kind of supranational controls it is bringing about, along with the ever-increasing bureaucratic control of education in the UK, have resulted in producing 'academy' as the site of both oppositions and imaginative possibilities. And so, what has languished for some 25 years (since the late 1960s) in a benign bubble of individualist freedoms has suddenly emerged into the front row of political debates, concerned with far more than institutional administration. I have to confess here that despite knowing full well the dangers of this over zealous attention, I am quite pleased to see education actualised to its full political potential and become the arena in which issues larger than its own internal questions, are being discussed. In particular, education *in* and *of* and *for*, the arts with its flimsy, unstable and non-teleological epistemologies, is becoming an appropriate proving ground for the necessity to distance and problematise the relations between inputs and outputs in education and to insist on the complete impossibility of knowing in advance where thought and practice might lead.

How this impacts on education in the arts is particularly thorny, because here process and investigation are everything and the possibility of establishing hard and fast 'outcomes' that testify to the successful completion of a training or an educational apprenticeship, are virtually impossible to arrive at. One

shudders at the thought of increasingly 'professional' artists, curators, directors, critics, etc.' whose schooling is aimed at producing prescribed museum-quality final exhibitions, performances, exquisitely professionalised displays of cultural resistance, perfectly-honed and critically-positioned texts which are worthy of publication. One shudders not because this is dull, though it certainly is that, but because the idea of being able to foresee the expected outcome of an investigative process, is completely alien to the very notion of what 'education' is about.

At another level tensions have increased between different tendencies surrounding the field of educating 'creativity'; old fashioned notions of inspiration without articulation, slightly less old fashioned notions of the importance of analytical and critical proficiency all vie with contemporary pedagogies of actualisation, embodiment, and criticality as the lived-out consequences of knowing. All these jostle around in the same institutional stew, occasionally producing head-on collisions but most of the time co-existing in the kind of liberal indifference in which the contradictions and contentions of 'difference' are ignored for the sake of some ill-conceived harmony in which all the bases are covered.

I would argue that these factions produce a false set of conflicts and engagements. That the question in education in general and in art education in particular, the question that we have not yet begun to deal with, are not that of specifying what we need to know and how we need to know it, of who determines this and who benefits from it; instead it is a question regarding how we might know what we don't yet know how to know. And it is here, in the aim of accessing this complex aspiration that we need to change our vocabulary — to swap knowledge transfer and knowledge assessment, professionalisation, quantifiable outcomes and marketability for another set of terms and another set of aspirations.

These aspirations might have to do with the lived contemporary realities we experience, with the sense of urgency they might instil in us, with how these lived realities might point us towards the critical tools that allow us to enter the fray and become actors within it. What I would like to pursue then is a set of alternate emergent terms that operate in the name of this 'not-yet-known knowledge'. Terms such as potentiality, actualisation and access, which for me are the building blocks and navigational vectors for a current pedagogy, a pedagogy at peace with its partiality, a pedagogy not preoccupied with succeeding but with trying.

The sceptics among you will shake your heads and decry my naiveté, will say how can she not acknowledge the demands of bureaucracy and of the market, of the new entrepreneurship in the arts and the all importance of branding and consumption through the academy. Without for a moment denying the overwhelming pressure of all these factors, I would nevertheless argue that we need to learn to live in parallel rather than in conflictual economies; moving sideways, finding the opportune moment, engaging in numerous non-legitimated processes, producing the new subjects that we need for ourselves, always starting from right here and right now and forever searching for what might be *important* rather than *useful,* to know.

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Potentiality

First then to potentiality. Potentiality, following an old Aristotelian argument, is the opposite of actuality, so that it inhabits the realm of the possible without prescribing it as a plan. Giorgio Agamben says he might characterise his subject as an attempt to understand the meaning of the verb 'can', "*What do I mean when I say ' I can, I cannot'?"*

There are, says Agamben following Aristotle, two kinds of potentiality; there is generic potentiality, and this is the one that is meant when we say, for example, that a child has the potential to know, or that he or she can potentially become the head of state. The other sense of potentiality, belongs to someone who has knowledge or an ability. In this sense we say of the architect that he or she has the *potential* to build, of the poet that he or she has the *potential* to write poems. One of the most interesting aspects of potentiality is, that it is as much the potential for not doing as it is for doing, and radical evil is not this or that bad deed but the potentiality for darkness which is at the very same time the potentiality for light. "To be potential", says Agamben " means to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*; and only in this way do they become potential. They *can be* because they are in relation to their own non-being.

So thinking 'academy' as 'potentiality' is to think the possibilities of not doing, not making, not bringing into being at the very centre of acts of thinking, making and doing. It means dismissing much of the instrumentalising that seems to go hand in hand with education, much of the managerialism that is associated with a notion of 'training' for this or that profession or market. Letting go of many of the understandings of 'academy' as a training ground whose only permitted outcomes are a set of concrete objects or practices. It allows for the inclusions of notions of both fallibility and actualisation into a practice of teaching and learning, which seems to me to be an interesting entry point into thinking creativity in relation to different moments of coming into being.

Most importantly for me is that within the context of 'academy' defined by the duality I have sketched out and by which I do not mean an institution but a series of processes and of speculations — we can locate various important shifts that have occurred in our shared culture. Rather than thinking these through a series of increasingly relaxing authorities; of generic divides between media, of authoritative professors, of demands for output and product, of the negation of a concept, of apprenticeship and its requirement to imitate and reproduce — we can think 'becomings' that have no originary identity to emulate. "A line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination.... A line of becoming has only a middle, a middle is not an average, it is fast motion, it is the absolute speed of movement".

What are the shifts to which I refer and that exemplify this inbuilt duality of 'potentiality'?

One of the most important ones has been the shift from critique to criticality. From a model that says the manifest of culture must yield up some latent values and intentions through endless processes of investigation and uncovering.

Using literary and other texts, images and other forms of artistic practice, Critical Analysis attempts to turn the latent of hidden conditions and unacknowledged desires and power relations into a cultural manifest. Using the vast range of structuralist, post and post post-structuralist tools and models of analysis we have at our disposal, we have been able to unveil, unravel, expose and lay bare the hidden meanings of cultural circulation and the overt and covert interests that these serve. But there is a serious problem here, as there is an assumption that meaning is immanent, that it is always already there and precedes its uncovering.

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Criticality

But as we have moved to engage increasingly with the performative nature of culture, with meaning that TAKES PLACE as events unfold, we need to also move away from notions of immanent meanings that can be investigated, exposed and made obvious. For some time we thought that a teaching practice that exposes what lies beneath the manifest and a learning practice that entails a guided 'seeing through' things, was what was required. That it will somehow counter any inherent naiveté by helping students work against naturalised assumptions by what we conventionally termed in education, 'being critical'. While being able to exercise critical judgement is clearly important, it operates by providing a series of sign posts and warnings but does not actualise people's inherent and often intuitive notions of how to produce criticality through inhabiting a problem rather than by analysing it. This is true across education whether theoretical or practice oriented. It is equally true of experiencing art and other aspects of manifest culture. Within this shift we have had to be aware not only of the extreme limitations of putting work in 'context', or of the false isolation brought about by fields or disciplines, but we have also had to take on board the following;

• The fact that meaning is never produced in isolation or through isolating processes but rather through intricate webs of connectedness.

• The fact that college courses, art works, thematic exhibitions and others forums dedicated to making culture manifest, or work to re-produce them into view, do not have immanent meanings but function as fields of possibilities for different audiences in different cultural circumstances and wildly divergent moods, to produce significances.

• And ultimately on the fact that, in a reflective shift, from the analytical to the performative function of observation and of participation, we can agree that meaning is not excavated for, but rather, that it 'Takes Place' in the present.

The latter exemplifies not just the dynamics of learning from, of looking at and of interacting with works of art in exhibitions and in public spaces, but echoes also the modes by which we have inhabited the critical and the theoretical over the recent past. It seems to me that within the space of a relatively short period we have been able to move from criticism to critique, and to what I am calling at present criticality. That is that we have moved from criticism which is a form of finding fault and of exercising judgement according to a consensus of values, to critique which is examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic, to criticality which is operating from an uncertain ground of actual embeddedness. By this I mean that criticality while building on critique wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis; other than one of illuminating flaws, locating elisions, allocating blames.

But what comes after the critical analysis of culture? What goes beyond the endless cataloguing of the hidden structures, the invisible powers and the numerous offences we have been preoccupied with for so long? Beyond the processes of marking and making visible those who have been included and those who have been excluded? Beyond being able to point our finger at the master narratives and at the dominant cartographies of the inherited cultural order? Beyond the celebration of emergent minority group identities as an achievement in and of itself?

In Visual Culture some partial responses to the question of what comes after critique can be teased out through a shift of the traditional relations between all that goes into researching as a mode of learning, all that goes into making (practice) and all that goes into viewing (audience) the objects of visual cultural attention. This of course, builds on that mighty critical apparatus that evolved throughout the 1970s and the 1980s and in which an unravelling of the relations between subjects and objects took place through radical critiques of authorial authorities, of epistemological conceits and perhaps more than anything else, through the ever growing perception of knowledge as an extended wander through fields of intertextual subjectivities. That project is well underway and in its wake comes the permission to approach the study of culture from the most oblique of angles, to occupy ourselves with the constitution of new objects of study that may not have been previously articulated for us by existing fields.

Can the museum be thought of as the site of a 'radical pedagogy', a pedagogy that eschews the simplicity of *accessibilty* to information, experience or cultural capital and replaces it with questions about *access*? What, you might ask yourselves, is the great distinction between these two terms? Why hang an entire bid for a radical shift on the slight semantic difference between two related terms. I would say in response, it is a huge difference, one that signals the limit of culture as a readily available cumulation of information and stimuli, and its potential opening towards a re-articulation of the questions we know how to ask. How to translate this notion of '*access*' to the site of the museum? How can criticality operate in the museum, turning it into a space of learning in the real sense rather than in one of information transfer, aesthetic satisfaction or cultural edification?

And so 'academy' with its built in exhortation to both make and not make, to learn and not learn, is an embodiment of this form of criticality, of never standing outside while deploying some great analytical apparatus which allows us to 'know' to really, really know what is going on. Instead we are always already embedded in the problematic we are dealing with, living out its conditions, sharing its effects while being able to think it through.

In such a state fallibility becomes possible to incorporate into the larger scheme of things; not only is it possible and likely to fail but it is also possible to examine failure and to inquire as to how does it become a form of knowledge. For it is failure —rather than the triumph of being able to see through something seemingly hidden — that produces the affectual aspect of art — that moment which knocks you out of your territory and on the quest for re-territorialisation. "We are only ever interested in the circumstances" say Deleuze and Guattari and I would add that the "I Can "of potentiality is nothing more than the moment in which we make circumstances our own.

Oddly Enough

Many of the above insights have come through arts practices, instantiating 'practice driven theory'. This was a term originally evolved to move on from a 1970s/1980s model of arts practice which was highly influenced by and illustrative of, the theoretical insights that blew away the cob webs of expressivity, interiority and rebellious transgression of previous generations. Instead practice can spur one on, not because it is self-consciously informed but because it gives itself a different set of permissions. Permission to not cover all the bases all the time, permission to start in the middle, permission to mix fact and fiction, permission to invent languages, permission to not support every claim by the proof of some prior knowledge, permission to privilege subjectivity as a mode of engaging the world and its woes, permission to be obscure and permission to chart a completely different path of how we got here, at this very moment.

It is this odd space I have been calling 'academy' and which is partly university and partly museum, partly theoretical and partly practice-based, a space in which it is unclear whether the materials or the subjects are what make up its manifest, a mode of operating, is emerging which insists that we can learn not just from doing but also from being.⏮

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