

Notes for an Art School

Jan Verwoert

School's Out!-?

Arguments to challenge or defend the institutional boundaries of the academy

The relation of the academy to the field of art production is difficult to assess. First of all the academy is defined by the symbolic boundary that designates the inside of the institution as a place of education by distinguishing it from the outside world of uneducated amateurs and mature professionals. Is there any sense in guarding this symbolic boundary today or is it high time to abolish it?

The critic of the academy will argue that, as art students produce art just like any other artists, the dividing line between the inside and outside of the academy appears to be little more than a virtual boundary. Its only evident function is the establishment and enforcement of the distinction between those who have received the legitimation to call themselves artists (now and in the future) and those who are barred from this right. To call this boundary into question means to challenge the institutional power of the academy to monopolise the right to legitimise art—and is therefore quite simply the right thing to do. Against this argument the defender of the academy will hold that the symbolic boundary between the academy and the outside should indeed be guarded as it in fact continues to be one of the few untouched barriers that, ideally at least, protects art production from the competitive logic of the art market, and gives students the right and freedom to develop their practice in experimental ways that are not yet constrained by the pressure to serve their work up to the public as a finished, recognisably branded product. From this point of view, the right political move would not be to tear down the boundaries that preserve the freedom to experiment, but rather to defend them. Both positions have a point. So the academy can today be understood equally as a monopolist institution of power and as one of the few remaining strongholds against the art market.

This contradiction manifests itself in many different forms. The fact that the academy offers a refuge from outside pressures, the critic will claim, is precisely the reason why liberal and conservative academies alike become safe havens for ageing professors who can indulge in the privileges of their power without ever having to check the premises of their teaching against the realities and criteria of contemporary art production. What then is the academy but a machine for the reproduction of ignorance that warps the minds of emerging artists by feeding them with all the cynicism and defensive narcissism that flourishes in the brains of stagnated professors? Even if this may be true in some cases, the defender of the academy will respond, the strength of the academy still lies in the fact that it is only here that different generations of artists can coexist, learning from and confronting each other, while the outside art world either ignores the importance of the generational contract for the sustained development of art production or reduces it to the market logic of promoting new generations like new product ranges. In the age of the biennials, the generation gap actually seems to have narrowed to two years, as each new show is expected to introduce the next set of freshly emerging artists. This is why the academy has to be preserved as a place where generations are given the space and time to emerge and age at a pace that is not dictated by the speed of the market.

Fair enough, the critic will answer, but in the end the very assumption that the atmosphere and understanding of art production inside the academy is substantially different from the world outside is flawed. Instead of providing a genuine alternative to the market, the ideas about making art and being an artist entertained by people inside the academy are very often just a distorted version

of the dominant principles of the outside art world, with the effect that much of the art made in academies only reflects the desperate desire to approximate the standards which students believe to be the current status quo of gallery art. By the same token, it is at the academy that all the competitive strategies that are later put into practice in the market are learned and exercised in the shark-pit of the classroom under conditions that might actually be even more severe than those prevailing in the real world. If that should be so, the defender will retort, then this is precisely the reason why academies should first and foremost teach an awareness of the difference between the academy and the market, and of the potentials that this implies. And it is precisely this difference that especially the outwardly more progressive institutions fail to recognise as they invite active professionals from the field of contemporary art to familiarise students with its current status quo. The questionable outcome is that these students then emerge from their courses equipped with a ready-made knowledge of the latest aesthetics and terminologies of critical discourse, but nothing to contribute that would make a substantial difference within the field—since to make a difference is something you only learn when you take the time to grasp and confront the traditions and conventions of art practice and discourse.

Superficial teaching is not acceptable, the critic will agree, but this is because in general there is no excuse for bad education. And this is also why it is crucial to create open and dynamic structures, for instance, to bring younger professionals from the field into the academy as they may have valuable experiences to share and can play the crucial role of an intermediary generation between students and older professors. Having said all this, I still wonder: Haven't we only been discussing political commonplaces so far? To create the conditions for a good art education has always been the primary task of the people who run institutions, just as the struggle for better conditions has always also been the cause of student protests. These conflicts cannot be solved theoretically, they have to be fought out practically.

The Academy as a Site of Production Within the Expanded Field of Academia ...

Instead of pedagogical agendas, the critic continues, we should rather discuss the more basic question of what the function of the academy could or should be today! Can we really take it for granted that *education* is still the one and only purpose that the academy is to serve? According to the logic by which the function of the institutions within the field of art is conventionally defined and administered, each institution has a different role to play, of course. Art education is supposed to take place in the academy, art production in the studio, art presentation and circulation in the gallery, art collection in the museum and private home, and so on. If we assume, however, that the assignment of distinct roles to different institutions—following the maxim of 'divide and rule'—is, in fact, a strategy to consolidate existing power structures within the art world, should it not be a primary political goal to question such authoritative definitions of what an institution is supposed to be and do?

After all, there is ample evidence that the redefinition of the role of the academy is already in full swing. Ever since the conceptual turn in the art production of the late 1960s, the academy, apart from being a place of education,

has been claimed more and more as a site of art production, presentation, circulation and collection. The Fluxus performance festivals staged in academies in the 1960s are an obvious example. Similarly today, seminar settings provide a forum for the screening and discussion of video art and alternative films. As their works come to be collected in and circulated through university and academy libraries, the academic field has become a primary audience for at least some alternative film and video makers. In general, the definition of conceptually-based art practices as interventions into critical discourse have brought the field of practice much closer to the academic field. When, as Brian O'Doherty has elaborated, the conceptual work is reduced to an ephemeral gesture, project or proposition that challenges and renegotiates conventional definitions of art, the primary mode of existence of such a dematerialised work may in fact be its discussion and documentation in a contemporary academic discourse.¹ Consequently (as shown, for instance, in the intense exchange of ideas between the producers of the new wave of institutional critique and the critics of the American magazine *October*), the symbolic distance between the artistic production and academic reception of conceptual works can (for better or worse) shrink to an intimate circle as artists respond to the theoretical views proposed by academic writers, whereupon these writers, in turn, update their premises by reviewing the works the artists have produced in relation to their theories, and so forth. In the light of these developments, the academy today must be understood not only as an institution for education, but always also as a site for the production, discussion, circulation, collection and documentation of contemporary conceptual art practices.

To open up the academy to these new tasks also means to break down the boundaries of the institution. As the range of those who become affiliated with the academy by joining the academic discourse is expanded to include all kinds of artists, writers and cultural producers, individual academies become immersed in the general field of academia. Ideally then, the status of the single institution is no more than that of one hub among many that channel the discursive productivity generated by the field as a whole. And although the field of academia may often have to rely on individual institutions to host presentations and discussions, it is, in principle, not fully dependent on these institutions, as it can generate its discourse in personal exchanges and informal discussions just as well as in public symposia or exhibitions. The basis for the open affiliation of different producers with the academy is, in turn, not so much an identification with the role model of the academic but, on the contrary, a sense that, within the academy, clear identity profiles are suspended. In the expanded field the academy thus attracts, especially, those cultural producers who are marginalised within the field of art production because their professional identity (which may oscillate between that of an artist, writer, researcher, project maker, etc.), when measured in conventional categories, is as much in limbo as that of an art student of whom no one can say yet if he or she is a future artist or not. In general, work produced in the academy is a preparation for future art. The uncertainty of the status of work done in the academy (which notoriously prompts debates over the question whether student work should be judged by different criteria than the work of 'mature' artists) implies a huge potential, as it allows for experimentation with working models and forms of production that are not sanctioned by conventional standards. The academy can, therefore, become a site for unsanctioned forms of production

when it is activated as a local support structure for an international discourse between marginal cultural producers and intellectuals. In this spirit, the academy must be transformed into an open platform that offers a viable alternative to the museum and gallery system through the integration and redefinition of the functions of art education, production, presentation, circulation and documentation.

... Or as a Site of Resistance to the Depreciation of Skills

When you formulate the concept of an expanded field of academia with that much utopian vigour, the defender of the academy's boundaries will respond, it may sound like a good idea. Yet, if you look at the standards of work and discourse this expanded field has established so far, things appear in a different light. It still remains to be discussed whether much of the conceptually-based work that passes as an intervention into open critical discourse can, at the end of the day, really count as a substantial contribution. Often enough, those producers who participate in the international circuit of marginal artists and academy members have so little time left to do work as they travel from project to project and tackle issue after issue that all they can possibly do when they are invited to contribute to a show or conference is to hastily gather some available information and stitch it together around some more or less witty ideas. This has little or nothing to do with the in-depth analysis and sustained debate that only becomes possible when people take the time to develop their skills and positions within the context of a specific academic discipline or artistic medium. What we see, instead, is the rise of a new culture of art project-making that is superficial in its content, and in its form deeply entangled in the power play of competitive curating, as these projects are primarily commissioned to fuel the machine of the global exhibition industry and simulate a constant productivity, which purposefully prevents everyone involved from ever reflecting on what it is that they really produce.

The submersion of conceptually-based practices in the global exhibition industry we see today, the defender of the academy's boundaries will continue, is in fact the outcome of a tendency Benjamin Buchloh diagnosed early on as an inherent danger of the dematerialization of art production and deskilling of art producers pushed through by the Conceptual art of the late 1960s. The radical dissociation of art from all aspects of a skilled practice within a conventional medium, Buchloh warned, would in fact make Conceptual art all the more vulnerable to outside forces that seek to determine the shape and meaning of the work: 'In the absence of any specifically visual qualities and due to the manifest lack of any (artistic) manual competence as a criterion of distinction, all the traditional criteria of aesthetic judgement—of taste and of connoisseurship—have been programmatically voided. The result of this is that the definition of the aesthetic becomes on the one hand a matter of linguistic convention and on the other the function of both a legal contract and an institutional discourse (a discourse of power rather than taste).'² Buchloh concluded that the only form of art that could withstand co-option was a Conceptual art that engaged itself in institutional critique and criticised the exhibition industry from the vantage point of a distanced observer. You could, however, also come to a different conclusion. When the working model of the flexible but deskilled conceptual producer has been established as a global norm, a new strategy of resistance can be to reclaim traditional criteria of medium-specific art practice and defend the academy as a site where skills can

be acquired that may strengthen the autonomy of the artist in the face of the new set of dependencies created through the hasty culture of project-making.

Can the Academy be a Place of Initiation
Into Practices of Resistance?

But what then, the critic will hold against this, is the difference between the strategic evaluation of the skills acquired through an academic education which you propose and the neoconservative call for a return to traditional standards? Can you really distinguish one from the other? Or are you not inadvertently playing into the hands of retrograde traditionalists when you praise the potentials of a skilled, medium-specific practice and deny the revolutionary character and liberating effects of the conceptual turn in the late 1960s? Yes, the defender will agree, it is indeed essential to make it clear that the strategic re-evaluation of the notion of skilled practice and academic education in no way betrays the spirit of the initial liberation of art from its confinement to academic disciplines achieved by Conceptual art. Still, it should be possible to renegotiate the concept of skills *in the spirit* of the critical break with disciplinary power. In fact, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak seeks to do precisely this in her book 'Death of a Discipline'.³ In a discussion of the fate and future of the academic discipline of comparative literature, Spivak confirms her belief in the political necessity of an undisciplined form of teaching that challenges the literary canon of colonial modernity. At the same time, she articulates her discomfort with the deskilling of students who receive their literary training only on the basis of the advanced interdisciplinary approach of cultural studies and, as a result, often lack the basic skills of closely reading texts which students enrolled in traditional courses do acquire. 'We have forgotten how to read with care,' she writes.⁴ To rehabilitate the ideology of a disciplinary academic education is not an option. Instead, the question Spivak raises is on the basis of what method or model the skills of a discipline could be taught in a different spirit within the horizon of the critical philosophy of interdisciplinary education that cultural studies stands for.

To learn the skill of reading literary texts, Spivak argues, means to be initiated into the secrets of a cultural practice that can be a source of resistance against the administration and commodification of knowledge production if this process of initiation is carried out under the right conditions. One condition is that the skill of reading is not taught as a technique of mastering the language of literature, but rather as a sensitive practice of 'entering into the idiom',⁵ dedicated to the disclosure and protection of precisely those aspects of literature that remain resistant to any form of mastery, due to the sheer specificity of their language. In this sense, Spivak writes that, 'in this era of global capital triumphant, to keep responsibility alive in the reading and teaching of the textual' is a practice of resistance as it defends those moments within culture that cannot be commodified and made commensurable.⁶ Moreover, Spivak stresses, it matters *in whose name* the ceremony of initiation into the idioms of literature is performed. So, the second condition Spivak formulates is that academic education should be dedicated to a justified political and ethical cause. As a model for this moment of political and ethical dedication, Spivak draws on a proposition Virginia Woolf makes at the end of *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf asks her fellow women writers to dedicate their work to the evocation of the ghost of Shakespeare's sister, which is to say that they should write for a future audience of emancipated women writers and readers

and thereby call it into existence. To 'work for her' is the formula Woolf suggests for this moment of dedication. The distinctive quality of this formula of dedication is that it is specific enough to give a clear political perspective to the project of a feminist literary practice, while at the same time sufficiently open to avoid dogmatism. In the context of Spivak's argument, this formula of dedication becomes a model to describe the general importance and specific character of the attitude with which the initiation of prospective intellectuals into the skills of literary practice is to be carried out. It should take place in the name of a different future and be dedicated to the cause of making that future possible.

So, the critic will ask, the argument is that the dedication of the process of initiation into academic skills to a justified cause will transform the nature of the procedure of teaching and learning those skills from a tedious disciplinary ordeal to a progressive project? Is this not what also Nietzsche meant when he said that the right way to go through with a classical disciplinary education was to 'learn how to dance in chains'? The reply this idea must provoke from anybody with a free mind is the question of why chains should be necessary in the first place. Why should anybody submit themselves to a procedure of initiation when it is clear that such procedures by definition imply the forceful internalisation of the laws of tradition, a violence that can never be justified by the principles of the Enlightenment? No matter what cause you dedicate the procedure of initiation to, the means can never be redeemed by idealistic ends because they are inherently brutal. The only true alternative is to reject outright the academy and the form of disciplinary education it represents. Here we have got to the bottom of the matter, the defender of the academy will concede to the critic, because, in the end, the question we will have to continue to discuss is whether you can dismantle the disciplinary power of the academy and put its potentials to a different use, or whether the power structures of the institution remain too inflexible to allow for such a process of transformation. I believe that it is possible, but in the end we will have to see if works out or not.

Notes:

1. On the intimate relation of the conceptual gesture to the intellectual context of its realisation O'Doherty writes: 'It [The gesture] dispatches the bull of history with a single thrust. Yet it needs that bull, for it shifts perspective suddenly on a body of assumptions and ideas. [...]
A gesture wises you up. It depends for its effect on the context of ideas it changes and joins.'
Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986), p. 70.

2. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions' in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 519.

3 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 101.