

Notes for an Art School

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Speaking Thoughts:
On an Art School

Cyprus has got itself a biennial, Manifesta, and with it, it hopes to demonstrate its contemporaneity as a newly joined member of an expanded European Community. In 2001, when I resettled in Cyprus after 34 years of living, studying and working in London, there was a palpable sense of remoteness. Cyprus seemed geographically and culturally distant from events that were shaping the rest of the western contemporary art landscape, something that was felt especially strongly by the local arts community. Cyprus' accession to the European Union in the spring of 2004 meant that the island's future became intrinsically linked to a broader network of activities that are as much cultural and artistic as they are economic and political. Since accession, there has been a noticeable thawing of the isolation. In a way, the presence of Manifesta in Cyprus is testament to that. This is not to give the impression that the local arts community was passive; a few non-commercial art groups and individuals had initiated projects whose underlying purpose seemed to be creating contact between Cyprus and the outside world and the questioning of established ideas about art and culture.

In the absence of an art school in Cyprus, or of any other forum that might accommodate critical and constructive debate on art, I became involved in initiating and organising a series of annual seminars. Artalk began in 2003 and took the form of presentations by international artists, curators, historians, academics, philosophers and writers around themes and issues relating to the direction contemporary art is taking. As an extension of these seminars, Artalk invited the speakers to stay longer in Cyprus, and arranged less formal impromptu gatherings. These ranged from visits to artists' studios to late-night discussions in informal settings that allowed for a different level of exchange and debate. Creating a space that encourages different aspects of learning and exchange and breaks down the conservatism and pomposity of the distinctions fostered within academia is, I think, an important aspect of any creative educational institution and in particular of an art school. Mohsen Mostafavi of the Architectural Association (AA) in London highlights the importance of this when he refers to the bar at the AA functioning as a central meeting space that provides a different kind of environment for engaging in discussion. 'The idea is to construct a situation in the School that is enjoyable, that inspires and motivates people.' (Mostafavi, 2003)

Artalk as an organisation has been mindful of operating on these lines and, by identifying and responding to a gap within the culture and providing a public service, it has also sought to create its own distinct way of operating that allows for a layered and more natural interaction between the invited speakers and local artists, academics, intellectuals and members of the public.

From the outset, the policy was to encourage the participation of the wider community in the programme. The seminars were open to the public free of charge, and people from a range of professional backgrounds and disciplines attended. Also with diversity in mind, the seminars were programmed to expose the audience to different perspectives on the same subject. The spring 2005 seminars, which took as their central theme 'The Politics of Mobility', included presentations by Catherine David, who spoke of mobility in the context of her ongoing project on Contemporary Arab Representations; Michael Haerdter, who addressed mobility in the context of artist residencies as in the work of Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin and Res Artis—International Association of Residential Art; Claudia Wegener, who introduced her writing project '24hrs' and

the work of Foreign Investment, of which she is a member; and Ursula Biemann, whose work focuses on gender relations within the global economy, media, technology and urbanism.

Although the programme started with artists in mind, it was interesting to discover that the greatest enthusiasm and openness for debate came from non-artists, who seemed much more readily able to accept the issues raised within the seminars as abstract philosophical explorations that allowed them to approach their own daily practices from a slightly different perspective. In contrast, a number of artists expressed their disquiet with presentations that lacked visual material and also with work that did not produce consumable objects for placement within museums or galleries. This distinction between art as commodity and art as an exploration of the constitution of 'self' and its relationship to the everyday is an issue that runs through the history of the vanguard in art and is of relevance to the formation of any future art school.

What is an Art School?

An art school can be thought of as an art project. An art project can be thought of as a thinking site, functioning as a springboard from which ideas and concepts can be brought back to the notion of an art school, and give it new form and direction.

A recent article in *Artforum* (summer 2005), entitled 'Remote Possibilities: A Roundtable Discussion on Land Art's Changing Terrain', seemed to bring to the surface an endemic distinction that is symptomatic of the state of contemporary art: what I have called the 'be for art' and 'before art' syndrome; the dichotomy between emphasis placed on the production, marketing, selling and consuming of the art object on the one hand and, on the other, the notion of art as a creative way of engaging with the world. In the context of the theme of the 'remote'—as in artworks and projects being realised in distant places—the notion of 'stepping out' geographically and conceptually from the 'art circuit' was expressed by two of the participants in the roundtable discussion: Rirkrit Tiravanija in relationship to his project *The Land*, and Pierre Huyghe, who referred to his project *Antarctica* as 'a place without pre-existing protocol, a non-knowledge zone ... a place that's not overcrowded with meaning, rules, culture, even longitude and latitude'. Huyghe's reference to 'a place without scenario' is perhaps indicative of a broader criticism of the academic conventionalisation of meaning within art. Huyghe indicates the right of the artist to engage with art as process or event—not art as image or as representation of an event, but art as an integrated part of the everyday; where the everyday is brought back into the fold of the art praxis.

Reciprocity between art and the everyday is by no means a new idea. Nevertheless, if we are to accept that a fundamental aspect of art has been the production of objects to look at, either for pleasure or contemplation, then the dematerialization of 'the object' and the absorption of art into the everyday, as an event, does represent something of a fracture with modernist productions and practices and calls into question the very purpose of the art school. The present model of an art school has centred upon looking at, producing and talking about the unique object of art and developing strategies for positioning it within the art market. The lives of student-artists revolve around the anxiety of the production of the art object and it is through the object that their worth

is measured. The break with such a tradition in art presents an opening for rethinking the purpose of art and of what an art school *is* and what it *does*.

Art Without Object

Conventionally, the art school has reflected a dominant ideology that evolved around the production of the unique object. This idea was, and largely still is, prevalent within the world of art. Historically, the unique in nature, and analogously in art, has been revered in ritual acts as symbolising contact with the ineffable and the untranslatable. The art object, through the act of public spectacle, became imbued with a sense or 'aura' of some greater reality. Walter Benjamin demonstrated how the institutionalised world of art is connected to the social order, which idealises and adulates the unique as symbolic of a transcendent reality. This is what John Berger (1972) calls 'bogus religiosity'.

Modernist art, as Clement Greenberg defined it, and in particular painting in the form of Abstract Expressionism, which is no longer mimetic of nature, entered an age in which the very surface of the painting became its own self-referential reality. Hence, the uniqueness of the object was in the materiality of the medium and that was what differentiated painting from sculpture and art from other activities. Art and the artist demarcated well-defined boundaries between the inverted concerns of the world of art and those of society. The studio was generally regarded as a hermetic refuge from the outside world. In his studio, the artist entered into communion with his craft in search of the absolute and sublime through dialogue with the material itself. Art became self-referential, art for art's sake—and was primarily intended to engage the viewer on a one-to-one basis. This perception of art underpinned art pedagogy and a system of operation within the art school that emphasised the purity and distinction of art and the singular vision and insight of the artist.

By the beginning of the 1960s, the outside world had already entered the sphere of art in the form of Pop Art, with its reference to popular and consumer culture. The modernist distinction between art and wider culture and the privileged place the art object occupied on the basis of its uniqueness came under attack. Arthur C. Danto writes that 'the master narrative of the history of art' came to an end with the demise of Abstract Expressionism and the rise of Pop Art. Danto argues that when anything can be a work of art, as in the case of Andy Warhol's 1964 *Brillo Box*, where there was nothing in the outward appearance to mark the difference between 'art' and objects in supermarkets, then the meaning of art ceases to be taught by example. According to Danto, art makes the transition from experience to thought. Art becomes conceptual and one needs to turn to philosophy for an understanding of art (Danto, 1997). An illustration of these shifting concerns can be found in the work of the artist Joseph Kosuth. In *One and Three Chairs* (1965), he displays three versions of a chair: an actual chair, a photograph of the same chair made in situ and pinned on to the wall, and a blown-up dictionary description of the term 'chair', again pinned to the wall. In this seemingly simple display, Kosuth throws doubt on what constitutes an art object, mixing signifier and signified, and challenging the viewer to consider which is the object of art.

By pointing outward, to the everyday, artists were heightening

a perception of the world at large and extending the right to look across and contemplate a wider field of visual reference. In doing so, they were raising issues of the very contiguity of art to the everyday and articulating their own sense of being in the world. Ed Ruscha's photographs of *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* (1963) comprised bland and ordinary snapshots of gasoline stations on the highway between Los Angeles and Texas. The artist comments on the work: 'I don't have any message about the subject-matter at all. They are just natural facts, that's all they are.' (Meyer, 1972) Ruscha's seemingly nebulous and intuitive peering at the world, coupled with a healthy disrespect for aesthetic protocol, contains within it the seeds of complex entwining references. Photography, with Ruscha, becomes a deictic language that situates the artists within an actual event; there is no sense in which he seeks to transform the object aesthetically. The art is the event itself, the point of contact between the artist and the space he occupies, the space itself being a complex weave of geography and personal topography, a space to be appropriated by the 'I'. (De Certeau, 1988) In addition, Ruscha's photographs present a conceptual cultural landscape that exists within the collective consciousness as a form of Americana, an image that has been mythologised by the road movie. The photographs were reproduced in a small, slim book, which Ruscha published and sold for three dollars apiece. The artist states, 'I am not trying to create a precious limited edition book, but a mass produced object.' (Wolf, 2004)

The depreciation of the uniqueness of the object, together with an increasing interest by artists in the visual vernacular of the everyday and the banal, signified a perceptual shift in the arts from the production of the 'pure' self-referential image, or the idea of the original in the form of a palpable artwork, to art that connected the artist to the outside world physically as well as conceptually. Artists literally took themselves out into the world or engaged the world within their art. In *Catalysis I* (1970), Adrian Piper spent a week moving around New York in smelly clothing that she had impregnated with a concoction of vinegar, eggs, milk and other substances. In *Seedbed* (1972) at the Sonnabend Gallery, New York, Vito Acconci, hidden under the floorboards of the gallery space, masturbated to the sound of the viewers' footsteps in the empty gallery above him. The unknown viewer was drawn into the work as Acconci spoke his fantasies into a microphone. Both these artworks direct attention away from the art object as product and throw the spotlight onto the artist and the event as art. Piper's and Acconci's actions point to another landscape, not to topography and the idea of personal mapping, but to social distinctions between the spheres of public and private. The gallery visitors, or in the case of Piper the general public, are not allowed to operate within the comfort zone of being a spectator, separate from what they see. Rather, the spectator is forced to internalise the work through the anxiety of displacement.

These artists are challenging fixed notions about the demarcation between the viewer and the work and between personal and monumental space. These unrepeatable gestures created by the artists have inscribed themselves within the history and mythology of the avant-garde in art. Their relevance for us today is in locating and evaluating our own contemporary practices; a necessary process, particularly in an era where the 'master narrative in art' has been replaced by consumer capitalism and a state of excess and intensification of the production

of the art object.

As our understanding of art becomes more amoebic, our sense of what constitutes an art school also becomes more questioning. We can now look beyond the conventional art school model, with its emphasis on the production of consumable artworks, for a possible re-articulation and transformation of the paradigmatic structures that form an art school.

Notes on an Art Project: A Thinking Site:
An Art School

In the roundtable discussion that appeared in *Artforum*, summer 2005, Rirkrit Tiravanija spoke of a project which, while very different, nonetheless encapsulates similar sentiments to those expressed by Pierre Huyghe. This project was *The Land*, which he initiated in 1998 with fellow Thai artist Kamin Lertchairprasert. The project is *not* art, as the founders are adamant to point out. It is literally a piece of agricultural land whose significance lies in the convergence of artists, local farmers and students, with the aims of producing foodstuffs, of functioning within the sphere of the everyday, of growing vegetables, cultivating rice and working towards 'a sustainable infrastructure, not outdoor sculpture'. Tiravanija also referred to the project as a thinking-site away from the art world circuit. In addition, *The Land* functions as an impromptu art school, with visiting international artists giving talks to local art students. Tiravanija sees *The Land* as a laboratory, lending itself to long-term projects without expectations or time frame.

Whatever paradoxes and inconsistencies this project may operate within, it does open up a timely space for conjecture, for rethinking and re-articulating the structures of the art school based on group dynamics rather than individualism, integration rather than exclusion, hybridism rather than purity, exploration rather than interpretation. It points to an art that is essentially social and purposeful, rather than self-serving. It is possible to imagine the function of an art school quite literally as individuals coming together for a common purpose, to explore and discover what that shared purpose may be at the collective level. This seems to me a profoundly important vantage point from which to think about the formation of an art school. Perhaps we should not be thinking of a school as such, but a laboratory that lends itself to exploration, as proposed by Tiravanija. That an art school could first and foremost be simply a collection of people coming together to explore possibilities in relationship to the collective seems an excitingly alternative start. No architecture required; the needs of the group take shape and form as they arise and expand. The process is organic and about mutual respect; not a building of bricks and mortar, an institution of logical divisions and abstract splits. The group learns to function on the collective level as an organism that is allowed to expand and contract according to its own needs, that is, the needs of the group. It will form itself into a distinct body with no preconditioned forms, structures or functions. An art laboratory with such a sense of orientation would make it possible to advance art projects of a different time-scale to those accommodated within the present model of an art school. These would be projects that are not directed towards the consumerist imperatives of the art market but instead evolve out of collaboration and shared interests and engage individuals of diverse backgrounds, not just artists. Unlike an exhibition, whose content can be

unpacked and staged anywhere in the world, an art school does not function as an isolated system, and, in order for it to have a future, it needs to interact with the world around it, both at the local level and connecting to the wider art community. I believe a truly progressive art school needs to respond to what is lacking within institutional spaces of culture and seek to transform everyday life. Further, it would function as a matrix that opens up spaces for exploration, experimentation and growth beyond conventional expectations and time frames.

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