

# **The Pedagogical Model:**

## **To Make Shame More Shameful Still by Making it Public**

Axiomatic to any insight into political economy is the principle that a worker must not only produce an ostensible product, but also at the same time reproduce the social relations underlying the conditions of production. In other words, the system of political economy must itself be reproduced via the way a particular productive process is organized in economic terms: through the interrelation between acceptable standards of living, length of the work day, wages, the allocation of surplus value and so on. If this were not so, nothing would compel people to keep returning to work. The teaching profession brings this connection between production and reproduction into the sharpest possible focus and nowhere more forcibly than in fine arts instruction. Imparting skills (or even something so ambiguous as "a sensibility") and instilling vocational goals means that the student must first in effect accept and internalize, critically or not, the systemic paradigm of the political economy -- and much of this occurs through the figure of the teacher. Moreover, the fine arts, despite

(or, perhaps, because of) their conspicuous technological obsolescence, still serve, sine qua non, as the most effective means for establishing ruling class values as esthetic values, in other words, as values that are seemingly not derived through the invidious differential between social classes. These practice involves social critique. Here, within the overdetermined role of teacher, the built-in pressure to reproduce the paradigm necessarily qualifies the efficacy of one's critique. Nevertheless, political economy is not historically invariable; the way it changes at least begins with the aspirations of competing social classes.

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Not surprisingly, the approach of any teacher derives largely from her or his own education. Thus, analyses of the ideological function of American art education must take into account some of the trends in postwar art instruction in the United States, all of them still exert some influence to a greater or lesser extent. The end of the Second World War established New York City as the world center of visual art, largely through the influx of European artist-refugees. The Works Projects Administration (WPA) had already laid the foundation for the acceptance of visual art as part of public life. The booming postwar American economy allowed European esthetics to take root, partly by creating an emergent class of collectors and patrons, partly by creating an affluent middle class which sought to encourage personal growth through self expression. This liberal bias embraced all kinds of painting, children's art especially, as a symbol of self-realization. At the same time, the G.I. Bill of Rights (which included low interest loans for college tuition) encouraged an unprecedented number of Americans to pursue secondary education for the first time. Starting at the university of Iowa, specialized Master of Arts (M.A.) for students majoring in visual art. The student population -- and with it the demand for teachers -- expanded continuously until about the middle 60s. Then, the trend reversed itself as the supply of prospective teachers outstripped demand.

Before the Black Mountain College of the Arts achieved its legendary pre-eminence, the model for art education in the United States was generally one where a teacher expected students to copy his or her (usually his) own work. The more well known the teacher's art, the better the students were expected to be. Curiously, this literalized the idea of reproduction; the father

figure produced little versions of himself. Such a notion of students as progeny dovetailed neatly with the then current "Oedipal" logic of the avant-garde wherein each successive generation of artists was expected to master, then renounce the art of its forebears. This kind of parallelism between pedagogy and avant-gardistic art still holds true today. More ambitious art programs still tend to assimilate elements of current esthetic discourse into the didactic techniques themselves.

Black Mountain College was reorganized as a specialized art school in 1940. Its first phase had been dominated by the Bauhaus approach of Josef Albers and Walter Gropius. Out of this grew an attitude of more open-ended experimentation which came to represent the school. Black Mountain attracted many luminaries as teachers, including John Cage, Harry Callahan, John Chamberlain, Merce Cunningham, Robert Creeley, Willem de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, David Tudor and Peter Voulkos. Its students included Robert Rauschenberg and Ray Johnson. Although Black Mountain's emphasis in training was more experimental and less didactic than other schools, certain assumptions still were nested in the very idea of what experimentation meant: de-controlling the process used to make an artwork identified nonetheless as a "well policed" (institutional) form, such as a symphony, a drawing, etc.

Although Black Mountain's pedagogical philosophy was never repeated as successfully elsewhere, it nevertheless shifted the dominant model away from a cult of artistic mastery and toward process or more objectifiable, technical methods. At the very least, it allowed more demonstrably formalist training to assert itself at other schools. In provincial settings, formalist rigor tended to devolve into organizing art instruction around craft and technique on a quasi-beaux-arts basis. Teaching art as technique simplified curricula and helped to create a sense of steady progression as students passed from Painting I to Painting II to Painting III and so on. As such, results were clearly verifiable and so the demands placed on a teacher's attention were kept to a minimum -- as were more discursive esthetic considerations.

Throughout the 1970s, a pluralistic spirit asserted itself in American art schools. The results were mixed. Several factors contributed to this climate. The prolonged impact of Abstract Expression was one, with self-expression still considered to be the essential basis for art production. With this understanding

many teachers at this time tended to interfere with students less so as not to hamper this process. Later, as a result of the student activism, the figure of the teacher commanded even less authority. Some teachers sided with activist students, rightly or wrongly construing their relationship to students as a kind of friendship. In many schools, this combination of forces worked only to create an anarchic mish-mash of various pedagogical and esthetic styles. In other instances they inspired new approaches, like those of the Whitney Museum of American Independent Study Program and the California Institute of the Arts.

Begun in 1968, the Whitney Program was conceived as an open-ended yet pragmatic environment. The faculty was small: four teachers (Ron Clark, Yvonne Rainer, David Diaio and David Hupert in 1977). The only requirement was that students attend a weekly seminar in which a different artist would discuss her or his work. These discussions tended to be rigorous, reflecting the Whitney Program's politicized definition of esthetics. Otherwise, students received an optical reading list, studio space and were left to their own devices. Informal discussions, ranging from gossip to theory, took place every afternoon. Because the Whitney Program ran on an extremely modest budget, it avoided the strings typically attached to public and private funds. This helped to foster an environment where students and teachers could work relatively free from constraints. Ironically, Whitney students tended to become successful because they had been encouraged to think critically rather than simply produce.

The California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) began in 1964 as a school staffed and administered by artists. Like the Whitney Program, it was typified by an open-ended pragmatism. Conceived by Disney as an interdisciplinary elf factory, the school was taken over by avant-gardists with plans of their own. The inaugural phase of the school was marked by the Feminist Art Program run by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro and by Allan Kaprow presiding as dean of the Art School. The next phase was dominated by the conceptual artists Douglas Huebler, John Baldessari and Michael Asher. At CalArts much of the real instruction occurred in the form of individual meetings between students and teachers. Classes were treated more as seminars than as traditional workshops in which students were expected to produce work under the watchful eye of the instructor. The foundation program functioned as a kind of threshing ground. Rather than being given projects, first-year students were asked to

articulate what it was they wanted to do as artists. This adamant demand for self-definition created a high attrition rate, but those who remained tended to become superior students. For the upper level students (in the late 1970s, at least) John Baldessari and Michael Asher were the most influential of the faculty. Baldessari's art and style of teaching arose very much out of Cagean esthetics. Baldessari was fond of saying that one could not teach art, but only provide an environment where art might happen. In classes and individual meetings he kept his comments mostly to jokes, anecdotes and paradoxical observations. At the same time, he scheduled a steady stream of young visiting artists in his so-called Graduate Seminar (which was actually open to students at all levels). Michael Asher held to a more austere approach, saying little except to ask his students what it was they wanted to talk about. This typically yielded prolonged silences while Asher waited them out. Such "silent treatment", conceived formally, made the role of the teacher analogous to that of a Lacanian psychoanalyst. (It also echoed a certain "pure reductivist" logic.) The presence of the teacher would ideally approximate that of a corpse; silences were akin to transference. The point of all this was for students to assume responsibility for themselves as "speaking subjects" or practicing artists, as the case may be. Later on, Asher adopted the policy of scheduling classes of indeterminate length. That is, he would continue to teach his class for as long as the students were willing to stay -- even if that meant going until the early hours of the following day. (This, too, recalls the variable length of the Lacanian session, although, with Lacan, the decision as to when to end the session

rests with the analyst.) Obviously, Asher could not always maintain his silence; serving on the demand for judgment within the classroom ultimately forced his hand. But the point was nonetheless clear; learning to make art was not a matter of getting instructions from one's teacher. It's worth noting that CalArts' "high conceptualist" period also was marked by the complete absence of women and people of color on the permanent faculty. Women were reinstated in the early 80s. By the end of the decade, the art school faculty began to be racially integrated.

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The university has become an institutional organization of ignorance; "high culture" itself is being degraded in the assembly line production of professors, all of whom would be cretins and most of whom would get the bird from any audience of

highschoolers.

On the Poverty of Student Life

Situationist International and the students of Strasbourg

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It's not hard to imagine teaching an endless number of art classes simply by mouthing such banalities as "push it", "That's exiting", or "You haven't taken any risks" at the appropriate moments. On the other hand, within such an institutional setting, even one's most heartfelt convictions may take on a nominal character. What mostly transforms someone into a cretin or "a universally despised figure" is being positioned within a web of institutional relations. As such, the "content" of what one has to say necessarily pales before the economic asymmetry in which racism, sexism and classism are embedded; at this level change comes slowly. Part of an art school's didactic momentum occurs through bringing a like-minded age group together; students often learn more from each other than they do from their instructors. The environment, as Baldessari said, "where art might happen" is mainly a peer group situation. This makes the apparent need for expert art teachers is somewhat ambiguous. In accordance with their seeming expendability (their extraneous role, the supply surpassing the demand), the rate of pay for art teachers is low. Furthermore, school administrators in the U.S. are doing away with the old system of tenured positions in favor of increased reliance on guest positions in order to reduce costs paid for benefits and retirement. Ultimately, teaching offers no financial security. Judith Barry has characterized teaching as a welfare for artists, that is, kind of sub-welfare or "workfare" -- artists can always be fired and are expected to log hours in the classroom. Thus, the responsibility of teachers may be delimited by their relative dispensability. Perhaps the most honest thing an art teacher can tell students is that he or she has little or no autonomous authority to judge their art. But it is exactly this admission, counter of romantic Situationist expectations, which would prompt younger students especially to give the teacher the bird. Most want the illusion of authority and it is exactly this illusion which stultifies their artistic (read political) growth. Other -- institutional -- factors inhibit "laying down (read: exposing) the law" this way. One, because disillusioned students may mean reduced enrollment, most schools subtly discourage teachers, one way or another, from dropping the pretense of expertise. Two,

insufficient enrollment in many cases results in cancelling at teacher's class. The unwelcome truth may cause many students to "vote with their feet."

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As an undergraduate student at the Rhode Island School of Design (a school with notably poor programs in painting and sculpture), I remember being told to think of my school years as a "special period" in my life before having to capitulate and take a menial job. In retrospect, it is apparent that this seemingly nurturing attitude was nothing more than an artistic death sentence. The financial realities facing the would-be artist and the relative inability of most art schools to address them cast the so-called freedom of the student (and the culpability of the teacher) in a considerably less rosy light. The postwar period in the United States saw a dramatic increase in the professionalization of art education; more and more artists felt that an MFA degree was a prerequisite for professional status. Much of this, of course, was linked to increased resulted from increased affluence and an emergent youth culture for which college served as a vehicle for extending adolescence. At the same time, the notion that artists might not only be able to survive off the sales of their work but also prosper became popularized with the growing commercial success of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. Allan Kaprow responded to this shift with "The Education of the Un-Artist, Part I." Although he actually concentrated mostly on the material forms of artwork and how they entered esthetic discourse, Kaprow nonetheless demanded that "the artist of the future must learn to evade his profession" and concluded with a light-hearted paraphrase of Karl Marx: "Artists of the world, drop out! You have nothing to lose but your professions!" Kaprow, of course, assumed that it is indeed possible to "drop out" and that artworks would remain in some way meaningful outside the discourse of art. (Kaprow, in fact, continues to serve as dean of the University of California in San Diego's art department.) Citing "the increased proletarianization of both those who make a profession of creating, and those whose profession prohibits them from creating," Raoul Vaneigem framed the question of the professionalization of the artist more discursively:

Consumer society, as we well know, reduces art to a range of consumable products. The more vulgarized this reduction, the faster the rate of decomposition... That communication so

urgently sought by the artist is cut off and prohibited even in the simplest relationship of everyday life. So true is this that the search for new forms of communication, far from being the preserve of painters and poets, is now part of a collective effort. In this way the old specialization of art has finally come to an end. There are no more artists because everyone is an artist. [\[1\]](#)

In other words, it appears that visual art was converted into more of a specialized profession just at the same time when the impetus and the sociological competence for esthetic discourse was becoming more generalized. And it also appears that in art education, a spell of institutionally administered bohemianism serves as a de facto prerequisite for professional status:

Because of his acute economic poverty the student is condemned to a paltry form of survival. But, always self-satisfied, he parades his very ordinary indigence as if it were an original "lifestyle": he makes a virtue of his shabbiness and affects to be a bohemian. "Bohemianism" is far from an original solution in any case, but the notion that one could live a really bohemian life without a complete and definitive break with the university milieu is ludicrous. But the student bohemian (and every student likes to pretend that he is a bohemian at heart) clings to his imitative and degraded version of what is, in the best of cases, only a mediocre individual solution. [\[2\]](#)

Paradoxically, in art, professional status also prolongs bohemianism. As an enduring bohemian figure, the artist teacher tends to keep clinging to the same illusions that help sustain the desirability of the student lifestyle. To dismiss this mythic freedom as a simply better disguised form of repression is tempting, but the problem is more complex than that.

First, any system of political economy engenders both freedom and repression; our habitual notions of both are formed and tested within such a system. Thus, the system must be regarded neither as impervious nor as monolithic. This suggests a horizon of possibilities different from one demanded by the posture of theoretical purity (an impasse which Guy Debord's suicide might be taken to represent). For example, in the United States the current Republican cultural backlash now threatens even the relative freedoms of repressive tolerance, freedoms many have come to take for granted. The former chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), Lynne Cheney, explicitly advocated "zeroing out" funding for both the NEH and the National Endowment for Arts (NEA) because so much of what they have funded in the past failed

"to transcend the accidents (*italics mine*) of class, race and

gender." [3]

Second, to treat the likes of the sleepy, dysfunctional art school, steeped in the smell of oil paint, as an element of total-izing repression is, in the words of Howard Singerman, to convert theory into a most unskeptical kind of positivism. Singerman, moreover, has explicitly criticized the way the CalArts pedagogy converted art practice from "a way of thinking in the world" into "a way of operating in institutions, of occupying positions." In his opinion, the pedagogical technique of "interrogating the bad consciousness of the artwork" short-circuited as this technique was carried over by students into the practice of making artworks. [4] In my opinion, however, the problem lies instead of the failure to self-reflexively interrogate the bad consciousness of the pedagogy itself and in the idealist assumption that one might occupy a cultural niche free from the specter of bad consciousness. The inevitability of bad consciousness in cultural production does not so much invalidate the whole enterprise as it does invalidate the conventional sublimatory function assigned to art and esthetics in all of their manifestations. The problem for students, teachers and artists is to be able to act on this unwelcome knowledge.

[1] Raoul Vaneigem, "Creativity, spontaneity and poetry," *The revolution of Everyday life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (London: Left Bank Books and Rebel Press, 1983) p. 155.

[2] Situationist International and the students of Strasbourg, "On the poverty of Student Life", *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), pp. 322-323.

[3] Lynne Cheney, "Moching America at U.S. Expense", *The New York Times*, March 10, 1995: A29

[4] Howard Singerman, "Jeremiad", *Skeptical Belief(s)*, (Chicago: the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago and Newport Beach: the Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1988), pp. 8-9

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