

The New Masters of Liberal Arts

ARTISTS REWRITE THE RULES OF PEDAGOGY

By **CLAIRE BISHOP**

“How can you bring a classroom to life as though it were an artwork?”
—FÉLIX GUATTARI, CHAOSMOSIS, 1992

Nestled in the Schlossgarten meadow in Münster, Germany, between George Brecht’s *Three VOID Stones* (1987) and Herman de Vries’s circular brick *Sanctuarium* (1997), now covered in graffiti, is a temporary settlement of tents surrounded by trees with colored mobiles hanging from their branches. Produced by Amsterdam-based artist Maria Pask for the latest installment of Skulptur Projekte Münster (which occurs every 10 years), *Beautiful City* is maintained and populated by a different group of students each week. It also features a notice board announcing the latest events, a vegetable plot, and a makeshift shower; in the middle of these is a large white tent housing a library of books on various religious persuasions (including tomes on witchcraft and the theological musings of Derrida), some colorful rugs printed with the artists’ drawings, and a dodgy woven wall hanging of the world religious leaders conference in 2000.¹ Inside the tent are lectures on Sundays at 2 PM, when a wide variety of speakers address the coexistence of different forms of faith in a modern age.

I managed to visit *Beautiful City* on a Sunday afternoon and found a Protestant Filipino lawyer in discussion with a Dutch Ph.D. student (also Protestant) on the role of religion in civic life.² The debate was informal (meanderingly bad toward the end) and lasted for almost two hours, during which time the audience dwindled from about 40 to fewer than 10. The lecture didn’t quite come to grips with the privatization of religion in civil society, which had been its billing, but it did have the inadvertent effect of making me aware of how little I know about the history of world religion. Theology has a vocabulary as specific as that of contemporary art.

Pask’s project contains many of the features that can be associated with a pedagogic turn in contemporary art: a library-*cum*-reading-room, a lecture program, the artist as producer. It perhaps comes as no surprise to find that Pask teaches at two art schools in the Netherlands (in The Hague and Den Bosch), since *Beautiful City* seems inseparable from the history of alternative education. But with such a pedagogically oriented project presented as a work of art, it’s hard to know what exactly we’re judging: Is it the quality of the lectures, the curatorial selection of speakers, the books in the library, the social space, or all of this together? It’s precisely this openness and undecidability that Pask finds appealing, as visitors will never be able to see the work in its totality. Whatever my reservations about its homespun New Agey-ness, *Beautiful City* is led by questions rather than answers; as such, its scholastic attitude stands in contrast to more didactic works in Münster, like *Trickle Down* (2007), Andreas Siekmann’s diagrammatic critique of global capitalism.³

Pask’s project is typical of a rising field of art that engages with collective learning at the level of adult or higher education, in contrast to the children’s workshops that form the mainstay of so many museum-education programs. But why is this happening so conspicuously today? Art historically we could argue that it represents a development of the relational practices of the 1990s: giving content to conviviality, while aiming to produce a concrete intervention in the social field. This tendency also dovetails with the present decade’s mania for discussion in art, whereby no exhibition is complete without a symposium, conference, or webcast interview. This increasingly discursive and intellectual approach to exhibition making was set in motion by Catherine David’s Documenta X (1997), and now seems to have migrated into the work of art itself. But outside the artworld, we might equally see the pedagogic turn as a reaction to the neoliberalization of higher education, in which the continual withdrawal of public money has led universities and colleges to operate within a business framework. It is unlikely that artists such as Pask would regard themselves as consciously reacting to this ideological shift, but it seems difficult to view the two trends as unrelated.

Another artist who has frequently employed an educational framework is Thomas Hirschhorn. In autumn 2004, Hirschhorn organized *24h Foucault* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, a project that included an auditorium, library-documentation center, sound library, video library, exhibition, bar, souvenir shop, newspaper, and archive. The conceptual core of the installation was a 24-hour program of lectures over one weekend in October. Rather than producing a “straight” academic conference, after which one would be equipped to discuss the French philosopher’s ideas, Hirschhorn took an approach that was chaotic and multidisciplinary. Twenty-four philosophers, art historians, poets, artists, and musicians each performed for one hour within a specially constructed auditorium bearing the hallmarks of Hirschhorn’s sculpture in provisional materials: cardboard, photocopies, slogans, brown tape, and so on. Significantly, Hirschhorn operates from a position of amateur enthusiast rather than informed professional. “Concerning Foucault, I do not understand his philosophy, and I think that I don’t have to understand philosophy in general,” he said in an interview with *FlashArt* in 2004. “I am not a connoisseur. I am not a specialist. I am not a theoretician . . . I want to work as a fan.”

Both Hirschhorn and Pask represent an approach that differs distinctly from typical contemporary university pedagogy. Professional teaching is steered toward the production and measurement of successful results. Speak to any academic, and you will be swiftly inundated with groans concerning the administrative burden of today’s university education: learning outcomes and assessment criteria have become more important than imaginative content and delivery. These changes have been instigated by neoliberal economics: over the past decade, fees have been introduced in universities and colleges in Europe, and the ethos of education has changed accordingly—from freedom, discovery, and exploration to a financial investment (or crippling debt, especially for those studying the humanities). With students perceived as consumers, experimental teaching has been phased out and teachers have become accountable providers of knowledge. Whatever we think about the success of Pask’s and Hirschhorn’s projects *as art*, their freedom of operation represents an unthinkable autonomy and an unencumbered passion for knowledge.

Outside Europe, other artists have adopted a less event-based mode of educational engagement, often to compensate for the failures of art schools operating in their regions. Here the resistance is to traditional or outmoded ways of teaching, and promotes an integrated access to international debates. In August 2002, Cuban performance artist Tania Bruguera established an experimental art school in Havana called *Arte de Conducta*, or Behavior Art. (Bruguera’s school is notably hosted by an accredited art academy, the Instituto Superior de Arte.) The first course began in January 2003, and the program is planned to last five years. Students come from a variety of disciplines, as do visiting lecturers. “We had workshops from a former prisoner, a mathematician, sociologists, architects, DJs, philosophers, writers, activists, political figures, historians, lawyers, and of course art critics! historians and practicing artists,” explains Bruguera. Workshops have taken place in a park, an office, a museum, a science lab, a conference center, private homes, and on city streets, reflecting the school’s philosophy of bringing art into engagement with society. It’s hard to understand *Arte de Conducta* from a distance, not least because there is no representation of it currently available. The only way to “see” the school—in terms of conventional art spectatorship—is to participate. Bruguera is adamant that the project be perceived as a work of art, but what differentiates it from works by Pask and Hirschhorn is her desire for art to be consciously “useful.” The aim is to effect long-term changes in the artistic production of Cuba, compensating for the shortcomings of official education provision and offering firsthand (rather than mediated) exposure to international artists and their work.⁴ By contrast, the works of Pask and Hirschhorn are less urgently connected to the provision of education and stand more symbolically for the creation of community through the energy of shared ideas.

A project comparable to *Arte de Conducta* might be Lia Perjovschi’s Centre for Art Analysis (CAA), based out of her studio in Bucharest. Perjovschi describes the CAA as a “museum in files”: the hundreds of boxes that line the walls of her studio, containing articles, photocopies, images, and so on. Unlike an institutional archive, the boxes are organized around an idiosyncratic array of themes and issues that have contributed to Perjovschi’s own artistic formation. Prior to the 1989 revolution, Romania had no access to such information. For Perjovschi, the ability to have a dialogue and explain art in her context depends on having a shared body of knowledge, and this starts with sharing a technical vocabulary of

specific words (such as *performance*, *institution*, *installation*). For all its idiosyncrasy, the CAA is an important alternative resource to the Univeritate Nationala de Arta (located in the same neighborhood), which still adheres to traditional-rather than conceptual-approaches to art. Perjovschi's studio provides an informal haven and alternative pedagogic playground for renegade students seeking a more open frame of discussion.

There are important precursors to these efforts. Perhaps the most towering educator in recent art history is Joseph Beuys, whose legacy provides direct inspiration for Hirschhorn, Bruguera and many others. Significantly, however, he kept his commitment to free education at one remove from his sculptural practice. Arguably more relevant (and recent) precedents can be traced to the late 1980s, when Martha Rosler and Group Material produced groundbreaking exhibitions at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York that reconfigured the space into a social forum for critical thinking on homelessness and democracy, respectively. Their approaches anticipated what has been dubbed New Institutionalism in Europe: an attempt to broaden the remit of a gallery from an exhibition space to a center for the production of publications, archives, symposia, and residencies.⁵ Unlike Beuys, whose pedagogic performances invariably resulted in objects or installations, these contemporary efforts demote the art object to just one component of an integrated research project.

Other approaches may be as much about the artists' collective research as they are about their learning. Polish artist Pawel Althamer, for example, realized *Einstein Class* in 2005 after being commissioned to make a work celebrating Einstein's centenary. Althamer developed a six-month project in Warsaw to teach physics to a small group of juvenile delinquents, led by a rogue science teacher who'd recently been laid off. For another project, this time in Paris (*Au Centre Pompidou*, 2006), Althamer himself became the teacher, taking 10 students from different art schools to a secluded wood in Poland. The experience during the workshops on this trip became the basis for a collectively produced puppet show in Espace 315 at the Centre Pompidou.

More interesting than the final product of *Au Centre Pompidou* was Althamer's professed desire to "study among students": to explore, communicate, and continue the way of learning that he experienced in classes taught by Professor Grzegorz Kowalski in the late '80s. The so-called Kowalski Studio at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts rejected the traditional model of serving as "master" to student "apprentice." Instead Kowalski taught through "visual games," open-ended tasks that also functioned as a form of collective analysis, both critical and therapeutic. Many of today's leading generation of Polish artists were taught by Kowalski, including Artur Zmijewski, whose video *Them* (2007), at Documenta 12, epitomizes this task-based way of working. In 2005, Zmijewski and Althamer revisited Kowalski's approach in "Choices. pl," an exhibition organized as a group studio for all former pupils of Kowalski. Constantly mutating, process-based, and chaotic, this exhibition-as-studio-laboratory spread throughout several galleries of the Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw. It was critically panned as incomprehensible, and even Kowalski sought to distance himself from what was being done in his honor.

Like many of the projects I have discussed, "Choices. pl" may not mean much to viewers anticipating a cohesive and completed exhibition. It's more significant as an attempt to present a pedagogic process self-reflexively rather than by illustration. Althamer described the project to me as "therapy for artists"—in other words, as a liberation from the pressure of producing a packaged show for easy consumption. One has to admire the CCA Warsaw for allowing this experiment to take place, even while its communicability is less amenable to a general audience than the lectures organized by Pask and Hirschhorn. But what links all these projects, despite their disparate ideological contexts, is a commitment to experimental thinking about the relationship between art and society, and a desire to preserve a collective space of nonbureaucratized investigation. Their significance derives *not* from the issue of what it means to reimagine the work of art as education (because this would play into the hands of those who wish to instrumentalize art to socially useful ends), but to rethink the possibility of nonalienated learning through the lessons of artistic sensibility. This is what I understand to be the import of the rhetorical question, posed by Félix Guattari, that serves as the epigram for this essay. The straitjacket of efficiency and conformity that accompanies authoritarian models of education seems to beg for playful, interrogative, and autonomous opposition. Art is just one way to release this grip.

For more information and endnotes, see Index, p. 110.