

CUMMA PAPERS #10

CUMMA (CURATING, MANAGING AND MEDIATING ART) IS A TWO-YEAR, MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME AT AALTO UNIVERSITY FOCUSING ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS PUBLICS. AALTO UNIVERSITY IS LOCATED IN HELSINKI AND ESPOO IN FINLAND.

NORA STERNFELD SAILING IN SEARCH OF RADICAL EDUCATION, DON'T TAKE THE NEXT TURN

The turn is in great demand. At least since the 1990s, critical gallery educators have got used to a new trend for yet another cultural *turn* being announced almost every season: First, we¹ learned to understand the *linguistic* turn and to canonize the *discursive* turn as an engagement with the critical exhibition theory of the 1970s and after. Later on, we endorsed the *performative* turn and considered the speaking done in gallery education to be an action that has effects—an action that reproduces power relations, but can also change them.² Within the *spatial* turn we explored the meaning of space as social space,³ and have tried to open up spaces of action for critical practice. Now, we can take a self-critical look at the conditions that we find ourselves in and that we (re)produce. And it was this very passage from turn to turn that made us into critical—and also versatile⁴—gallery educators.

When, recently, there has been more and more talk of an *educational* turn, the character of the turn itself is no longer surprising. Because attention now turns to the field of mediation and critical education, a critical perspective from within this field will be formulated here.⁵ While Irit Rogoff speaks of the promising potentialities and actualizations of “turning,”⁶ here the focus is on the question: What governmental function⁷ will the emphasis on frequent paradigm shifts and permanent change have?⁸ In sailing, there are two forms of “turning”—tacking and jibing. Both of them are manoeuvres that use the wind to change course. Turning constantly, however, would mean no more than perpetually spinning on one’s own axis. Contrastingly, this text explores the extent to which a perspective on continuities can contribute to the possibility of going forward and acting.

THE CHANGE IMPERATIVE

Transformation seems to be on the agenda, not only in recent discourses in gallery education, but also in innovative museum concepts. Speaking at the presentation of the programme for the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) in Vienna on November 24, 2011, Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, MAK’s director since 2011, named “change” as the museum’s new guiding theme: “Applied art has to be filled with new life. Its potential for a positive transformation of our society socially, ecologically and culturally is the main theme of an active Museum of Applied Arts.”⁹ As a “highlight of the strategic focus on change” he is planning to initiate a “European Triennale for positive Change” in 2014.¹⁰ Nowadays, and preferably publicized using the slogan *social change*,

¹ I am using “we” because I have been thinking about gallery education since the mid-1990s in the context of various collaborations and collectives with colleagues, friends, students, teachers and inquirers. My experiences can thus only be expressed in a “we”. Possibly, this is related to the fact that a critical discourse on gallery education developed precisely in opposition to the singularization and competitiveness of a precarious field.

² See Andrea Hubin, “Handlungsmacht an den Rändern der Macht” in: *Art Education Research* 2 (2010), accessed February 3, 2012, <http://iae-journal.zhdk.ch/no-2/abstracts/> and Carmen Mörsch, “Queering Kunstvermittlung: Über die mögliche Verschiebung dominanter Verhältnisse auf der documenta 12” in: *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* 137 (2007): 29–36.

³ See Bill Masuch, “Der offene Raum. Handlungsräume in Kunst und Kunstvermittlung” in: *Corporate Difference: Formate der Kunstvermittlung*, ed. Pierangelo Maset, Rebekka Reuter, Hagen Steffel (Lüneburg 2006), 87–128.

⁴ Sadly, both in the sense of intellectually versatile, having a quick grasp and reactions, but also opportunistic and easy to influence.

⁵ Especially in order to “contradict oneself”, as Carmen Mörsch put it in this publication.

⁶ Irit Rogoff, “Turning” in: *e-flux journal* #0 (2008), accessed February 3, 2012, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/turning/>.

⁷ Michel Foucault uses the notion of governmentality to describe techniques of governance in which sovereign power and increases in efficiency are not achieved through coercion or discipline, but by other mechanisms of population control, such as good conduct and voluntary self-regulation. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁸ See Agnieszka Dzierzbicka and Alfred Schirlbauer, eds., *Pädagogisches Glossar der Gegenwart. Von Autonomie bis Wissensmanagement* (Vienna: Verlag Julius Klinkhardt, 2006). Inspired by Michel Foucault’s studies of modern governmentality, the book’s “pedagogic glossary” uses buzz words that shape the current professional jargon and debates on education so as to adopt the perspective of “governing, being governed and self-governing” in order to shed light on the functioning of actual societal developments. Based on this, here the imperative and ubiquity of “transformation” and “positive change” in “innovate” museum and mediation concepts will be subject to a critical analysis.

⁹ See “Veränderung durch angewandte Kunst. Christoph Thun-Hohenstein präsentiert das neue MAK-Programm: Ausstellungen – Projekte – Strategien, Donnerstag, 24.11.2011, MAK-Vortragssaal,” accessed October, 9, 2014, http://www.mak.at/service/f_service_presse.htm.

the concept of transformation—like many other current terms in museums and education, i.e. the two public areas concerned with gallery education—is double-edged.

On the one hand, it is connected to the history of radical pedagogy, with emancipatory education projects and liberatory pedagogy from Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire to Gayatri Spivak and bell hooks defining themselves as transformative practices. Their goal was to enable insights into social relations with regard to their transformation. Arguably, the positive references to transformation that have been promoted by advanced approaches to gallery education in recent years come from this tradition.

Carmen Mörsch's positioning of gallery education in "At a Crossroads of Four Discourses" is relevant here. She differentiates between the

rather uncritical approaches of affirmation and reproduction and those she subsumes under the rubric "critical gallery education": these have the goal of analysing and changing institutional structures and societal relations by way of deconstruction and transformation.¹¹ Jorge Ribalta referred to a transformational approach in the mediation work done by MACBA in Barcelona as early as 2004—and particularly in order to establish a new solidary understanding of the public in the museum:

“ At MACBA we try to rethink the dominant conceptions of the public and experiment with other methods of cultural work based on these other possible ways of mediation. The point is to rethink and redefine the public from the contributions of feminism, queer theory and the experiences of the new social movements. And then to understand publics as transformers and not as reproducers, thus overcoming the current inadequacies of traditional political representation based on a bourgeois concept of the public sphere. In this process we pay a special attention to the activities of the new social movements.¹² ”

On the other hand, new and in particular neo-liberal tendencies of commodification and flexibility expect everybody to be permanently ready for change. At present, public institutions in the realms of education and museums are undergoing a major upheaval. Erich Ribolits speaks of a “permanent coercion of adapting to the demands of a post-industrial economy geared towards temporariness and quick changes.”¹³ Sometimes more, sometimes fewer empty promises of social transformation and amelioration fuel a mobilization that attempts to voluntarily leave behind existing structures, accept deregulation and precaritization, and to be constantly flexible and ready at any rate. How can the critical demand for transformation be approached against this backdrop?

¹⁰ Another excerpt from the above-mentioned press release: “The strategic focus on ‘change’ will reach its preliminary climax in 2014: Under the title European Triennale for positive Change (06.04. – 10.05.2014) Thun-Hohenstein initiates a European Triennale, which will also be an important contribution to MAK 150th anniversary. Talks with Austrian and international partners are already under way. Almost 5.000 m2 exhibition space will be available at MAK and in the flak tower Arensbergpark, and in the fall of 2012 preparatory events will begin. An international team of curators headed by Thun-Hohenstein will be commissioned to assemble important contemporary European positions of applied arts, especially design and architecture as well as contemporary art on the theme of ‘change’ in Vienna.”

¹¹ See Carmen Mörsch, “At a Crossroads of Four Discourses: documenta 12 Gallery Education in between Affirmation, Reproduction, Deconstruction, and Transformation” in: *documenta 12 education II. Between Critical Practice and Visitor Services Results of a Research Project*, ed. Carmen Mörsch, et al. (Berlin: Diaphanes, 2009), 9-33.

¹² Jorge Ribalta, “Mediation and Construction of Publics. The MACBA Experience” in: *transversal webjournal* (April 2004), accessed October, 9, 2014, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0504/ribalta/en>.

¹³ Erich Ribolits, “Flexibilität” in: Dzierzbicka, et al., 120–127.

REFORM PAUSE

Already in 2003, the artists and theorists Brigitta Kuster, Isabell Lorey, Katja Reichard and Marion von Osten conducted interviews in order to “to focus on the relationship between the precarization of the respective circumstances of life and the intractability of cultural and knowledge production, in order to look for the lines capable of collectivity there, which lead out of individualized experience. They discovered that the only thing that permeated all the interviews at a more general level was a suffering from a lack of continuity.¹⁴ Three years later, Marion von Osten developed the “reform pause” project in collaboration with students of Lüneburg University in the university’s Kunstraum exhibition space.

The exhibition dealt with the Bologna process and the coincident university reform. These contemporary developments were contextualized with debates and strategies used to mobilize the

knowledge society since the 1960s and 1970s, thus also referring to historical and current struggles for an alternative knowledge production. Taking the thesis of a “new spirit of capitalism”¹⁵ put forward by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello as their point of departure, project participants examined whether this transformation was primarily economy-oriented, and based on a market and efficiency ideology, which in turn strives for a re-disciplining of students and faculty, while also leading to added bureaucratization. Another thesis that was pursued saw the current transformation of the university partially as a neo-conservative return to the hierarchically structured universities, controlled by tenured faculty, of the 1960s. Critical engagement with the “project-based polis” and the permanent reform in the realms of education and museums have already found their way into project exhibitions and reform processes.

TO CATCH THE WIND

At the same time, the commodification and de-democratization of education and public institutions are the main targets of a transnational education movement. With this in mind, and in order to achieve a new notion of “free knowledge”,¹⁶ Irit Rogoff is working on conceptualizing knowledge production in museums and universities in the context of this movement. This is not about a freedom *from* power relations and societal structures, which—as Rogoff has highlighted repeatedly—cannot exist, since we are always embedded in these structures when we think, act, educate and produce knowledge. Rather,

¹⁴ “kpD, The Precarization of Cultural Producers and the Missing “Good Life” in: transversal webjournal (April 2006), accessed October, 9, 2014, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/kpd/en>

¹⁵ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London; New York: Verso, 2005).

¹⁶ Irit Rogoff, FREE, in: e-flux journal 14/2010, accessed October, 9, 2014, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/free/>

Rogoff is interested in a freedom *to* access another possible knowledge—which considers the conditions of power relations with regard to their transformation, and stands “in relation to an urgent issue.”¹⁷ What can this look like? Foucault taught us that this other knowledge always already exists—for “where there is power, there is resistance”—and he has dedicated part of his work to this “insurrection of subjugated knowledges”.¹⁸ And how, then, can we think of gallery education as counter-subjugation? While Rogoff focuses mainly on the production of conditions for potentialities, it seems important to me at this point to emphasize the concrete relation to existing social movements and struggles: That is to say: “[c]ritical knowledge production and emancipatory research have always been an integral part of activist practices and anti-capitalist movements and, today, are more prevalent than ever.”¹⁹ I thus want to propose a gallery education that is both “free” in Rogoff’s sense and “critical” in Mörsch’s sense, as a practice in solidarity with those movements and types of knowledge that have always already questioned “powerful containments”. Maybe this is less about creating the conditions for possibilities of resistance, than about being able to listen to and build upon them. For, if we assume that “where there is power, there is resistance”, this means that it is always already there when we begin to look for it. To a certain extent, this goes along with the eschewal of adopting a genuine and original individual perspective, and with the un-learning of one’s own powerful knowledge. I thus argue for a connection—admittedly contradictory and (self)-critical—to something that always already exists.

It seems all the more important to me to emphasize that gallery education has to position itself within existing conditions, and concomitantly within existing forms of protest. Therefore (if it seeks to understand itself as “critical” and “free”

in the sense of this text) gallery education has to radically eschew becoming the discoverer or pioneer of resistance.

Against this backdrop there emerges the possibility of decisions: What is at stake is not only turning or change, but taking a position in connection to already existing movements and struggles (and, in doing so, keeping in mind sustaining, hard-won knowledges and enabling continuities). Now, how can the practice of gallery education take on a position of solidarity and produce “free knowledge”? Indeed, one can find discourses and practices situated between education, art and knowledge production that define their work decidedly in connection to existing social struggles—for example in Berlin, Belgrade, Geneva, Kassel, Ljubljana, London, Timisoara, Vienna or Zürich.²⁰ The Centre for Possible Studies in London—a project curated by

¹⁷ Rogoff defines this as follows: “the task at hand in thinking through ‘free’ is not one of *liberation from confinement*, but rather one of undoing the very possibilities of *containment*.”

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, p.81).

¹⁹ Cf. the discussion “Critical Knowledge Production in Art, Science, Activism” at e-flux, NYC, which I organized in collaboration with Oliver Marchart on April, 12, 2012, accessed online February 03, 2012, <http://www.e-flux.com/program/critical-knowledge-production-in-art-science-activism/>

²⁰ Such as, for instance, Claudia Hummel (Berlin), Rena Rädle (Belgrad), microsillons (Genf), Sandra Ortmann (Kassel), *Radical Education Collective* (Ljubljana), Ultra-red (London, Berlin, New York, LA and elsewhere), Janna Graham (London), intermediae (Madrid), h.arta (Timisoara), *Plattform Geschichtspolitik*, Andrea Hubin, Karin Schneider and trafo.K (Wien) und Carmen Mörsch (Zürich).

Janna Graham at the Serpentine Gallery—situates itself at the interface between institution, mediation and local communities and activism.²¹ In this sense, Janna Graham speaks of a para-sitic practice of gallery education. She writes:

“While many activist tendencies in the United Kingdom are skeptical of pedagogical agents within arts institutions: for their adoption of a service mentality, their unquestioning fulfillment of reformist social agendas, their complicity with the corporatisation of education, few articulate what might be described as a ‘para-sitic’ agenda within arts pedagogy. This para-sitic agenda does not claim a position of freedom from these entanglements but rather the active occupation of this terrain as sites of critique and struggle. Para-sitic operations might be thought of as those which both draw from the nurturing and deeply problematic terrain of cultural institutions, but situate their aims, spaces and constituencies in a here that is also elsewhere. This elsewhere might be thought of less as a place and more as a map of affinities, affinities across those who struggle for emancipation from the violence of exclusion and exploitation.”²² ”

Similarly, the practice of the *h.arta*²³ collective from Timisoara is located at the interface between art, education and social movements. Their projects deal with feminism, antiracism and space. When they develop anti-racist educational materials for schools, it is a knowledge production that disrupts the classical positioning between the realms of art and education and their institutions. The ultra-Red collective, on the other hand, defines its work as a practice that is organized directly within political struggles:

“Collectively, the group have produced radio broadcasts, performances, recordings, installations, texts and public space actions (ps/o). Exploring acoustic space as enunciative of social relations, Ultra-red take up the acoustic mapping of contested spaces and histories

utilising sound-based research (termed Militant Sound Investigations) that directly engage the organizing and analyses of political struggles.”²⁴ ”

Another example is *Intermediæ* in Madrid—a laboratory for participatory projects that seeks to involve different agents and means of visual culture in engaging with societal relations.²⁵ Curatorial and pedagogical practices are thereby understood as the handing over of speech and definatory power, “as an exercise in listening and distributed expertise.”²⁶

All of these examples show that my putting into critical perspective the current development of an imperative for permanent transformation is by no means geared towards defending or restoring the old structures. Rather, I want to place myself within the context of a practice that poses an alternative to the false alternative between conservative, rigid or patriarchal forms of organization, on the one hand, and neoliberal pressure for change, on the other. This is neither about clinging to the status quo, nor about transformation by any means. The question, then, has to be about the possible direction that this transformation takes. And if there is something that is moving, then it is necessary to catch the wind and sail.

²¹ <http://centreforpossiblestudies.wordpress.com/about>, accessed October, 9, 2014.

²² Janna Graham, “Para-sites/ Para-siten wie wir” in *schnittpunkt*, ed. Beatrice Jaschke, Nora Sternfeld (educational turn. Handlungsräume der Kunst- und Kulturvermittlung: Wien 2012), 131. (The publication contains a translation of the Janna Graham text that I am quoting from here.)

²³ <http://www.hartagroup.blogspot.co.at/>, accessed October, 9, 2014.

²⁴ <http://www.ultrared.org/mission.html>, accessed October, 9, 2014.

²⁵ http://intermediae.es/project/intermediae_en/page/intermediae, accessed October, 9, 2014.

²⁶ Ibid.

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Nora Sternfeld:
*Sailing - In Search of
Radical Education,
don't take the Next Turn*

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