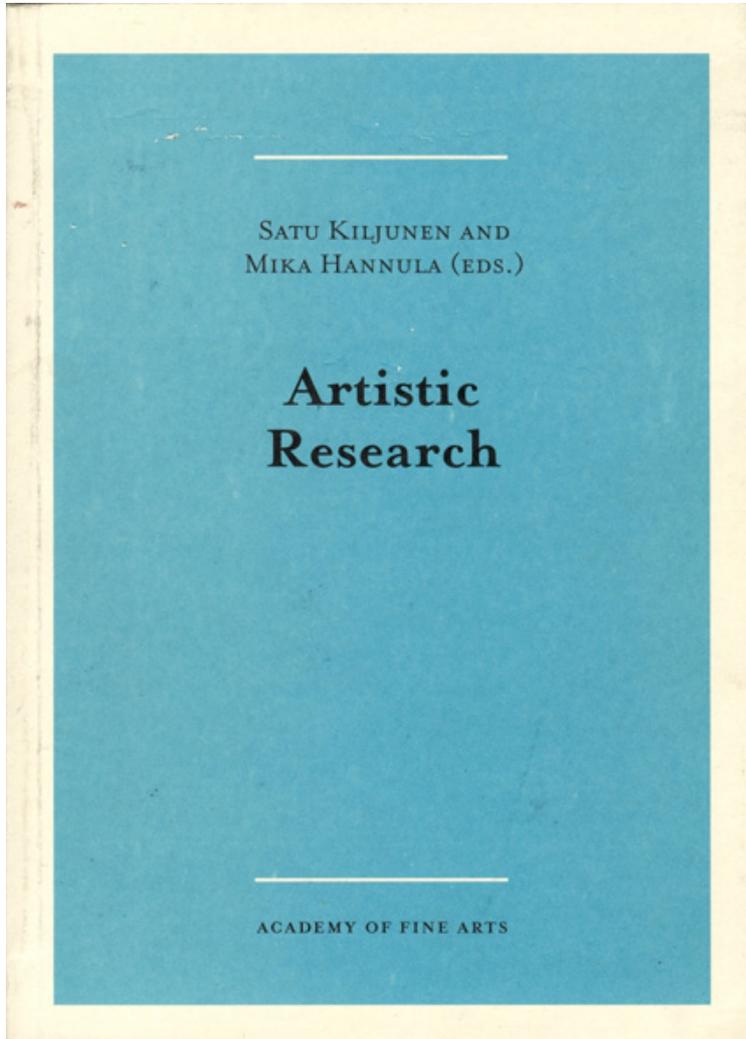


Simon Sheikh

Spaces For Thinking

Perspectives on the Art Academy



Artists with a Ph.D.! - this should only tingle the spines of conservatives, right? Wrong: The shifts resulting from the so-called "Bologna process" with its creation of a European standardization of academic studies in the fields of institutional art history as well as art education in academies hit hardest where the general significance of methodologies is at stake. Under the buzzword of an "artistic research", currently many things resurface in a canonized format that former generations of artists had fought for as principles of self-empowerment: to do research on your own account, without having to justify your doings in the face of Academia and its limitations. Is it only rhetorical to ask what artists not operating within the ideal of "research" will be doing in the near future? What - apart from short-term displacements of funding - can result from the "scientific challenge" to the field of art?

The challenges for artistic education today are indeed many. Some would claim that art education is at a crossroad between tradition and innovation, others that we are in a crisis of legitimation and methodology, perhaps parallel to a general institutional crisis of society, or even of global capitalism. A crisis not unlike the one that haunted my original field of study, or background, art history, in the 1980s. Here, there was a huge methodological crisis or even battle between

traditional empirical and descriptive approaches towards influences from sociology, epistemology, post-structuralism and feminism. It was a question of whether the discipline was self-contained, its object of study and methods hereof a (pre)given or whether it was a discipline that had a theory of its object of study - as is the Althusserian definition of science. Indeed, the discipline itself became the object of art-historical research: the history of art history (in an epistemological sense), now a subgenre filling numerous volumes. And it is now no longer possible to study the art object, the history and sociology of art without a reflection of the mode of study itself, without an auto-critique and certain notions of interdisciplinarity. Such reflections and history lessons are of value to us today, in an evaluation of the education of artists, or what we, in broader and perhaps more accurate terms, could call cultural producers. [1]. Especially since art academies may or may not be in a particular kind of crisis, but are at the same time hugely successful. Not only are artists, as I will return to shortly, branching out, as it were, into many other fields and disciplines, but also within the artworld itself are academies prevalent, if not hegemonic. If one looks at contemporary galleries, museums and international biennials, the artists represented here are almost exclusively all academy-trained, a huge difference to the ratio of just, say, twenty or thirty years ago. In this specific sense, art schools and academies have never been more effective or even successful in the influence on the art world and art production in general. Whereas most modernist art movements clearly happened outside or even in opposition to academies and academia, we have witnessed a merger between the academy, critical theories and discourses, museal representations and the market, although often in contradictory and even antagonistic terms. We therefore have to ask ourselves not only what system we are educating people within, but also, crucially, which system are we educating people for?

In the current debates on the development of artistic education, and more specifically the implementation of the Bologna process [2]. - meaning a European standardization of the Anglo-American academic structure of ba, ma and PhD degrees - we are witnessing a similar dichotomy to the one that plagued art history in the 1980s, between traditional, given modes and newer, interdisciplinary methods and approaches. As in the struggle between, or shift from, old to new art history, we see a conflict between the old master-student relation and a course-based system on the one hand, and between a (in)formal studio practice discourse and theoretical influxes and critiques on the other. In these forms of learning specific notions of art production - as well as the production of the artist-subject, are implicit:- as creation or construction, respectively. This dichotomy, or struggle, if you will, is happening on two fronts; in the educational system itself and in contemporary art production, with the former somewhat following or reflecting the latter. In contemporary art practices we can see a certain "permissiveness", an interdisciplinary approach where almost anything can be considered an art object in the appropriate context, and where more than ever before there is work being produced with an expanded praxis, intervening in several fields other than the traditional art sphere, touching upon such areas as architecture and design, but also philosophy, sociology, politics, biology, science and so on. The field of art has become a field of possibilities, of exchange and comparative analysis. It has become a field for alternatives, proposals and models, and can, crucially, act as a cross field, an intermediary between different fields, modes of perception and thinking, as well as between very different positions and subjectivities.

Art thus has a very privileged, if tenable and slippery, but crucial position and potential in contemporary society. Such expanded practices emerged, as we know, in the 1960s and 1970s, but have become much more prevalent in the 1990s, and where they were originally in a dialogical/oppositional relationship with the tradition of art and its institutions, it is today more fully institutionalized, and only secondarily in opposition via its formats, which is why it was termed respectively "contextual" and "relational" by territorializing theorists Peter Weibel and Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s. [3]. Art is as often purely a place or even pretext for communication and action, as it is an end in itself, hence recent buzzwords such as platform, plateau and project. This is neither the time nor place to discuss the merits of such projects and language games, but rather to point to a profound shift in the conception of art as objects and contexts, as well as of the artists as

subject and producer. We therefore need new tools, not only in an art historical sense, but also in terms of the education of artists as a discipline and institutional space. Perhaps it is also in this context that we should view the emergence of a term such as "artistic research", one of the buzzwords in the current discussions around art education and the modular model: on the one hand research seems implied by certain artistic practices, and on the other it seems to academically validate artistic work processes as such. We are dealing with a transferal of terms, since we are not just talking about "research" as such, as in other fields, but with the prefix "artistic" added. That is, something additional and specific to the field of art. One must thus inevitably ask what kind of practices does not involve artistic research? What practices are privileged, and which are marginalized or even excluded? Does research function as a different notion of artistic practice(s) or merely a different wording, validation process and contextualization that can mold and place artistic work within traditional university structures of knowledge and learning?

Often, but not always, in such dematerialized, post-conceptual and, perhaps more accurately termed, re-contextualized art practices, there is of course a notion of research invoked. Research has even, to some extent, **superceded studio practice**. Artists are increasingly researching projects, not only to make site-specific works, but also time and content specific works. Here, form follows function, and the materialization of the work is decided upon different parameters than in historical studio practice. For example, the introduction of documentary strategies into artistic practice over the last decade or so, naturally requires very different skills and methodologies than a traditional studio practice, but also - alongside the so called project exhibition - implying potentially very different goals and scopes. To a certain extent, it is the issue at hand rather than the end product of an art object that is primary. Studio practice has by no means disappeared, though, especially not from the art market, instead several conceptions of art practice seem to co-exist, and the battle lines between different artistic and political positions can not be mapped out only in formal ways, as was the case in early modernism. However, it is obvious that re-contextualized art practices are not resting upon the same pillars of tradition as the historical art academy, if on any, and it is clear that such practices are increasingly present within the art academies, both in terms of teachers and students, but not necessarily visible in the structural framework of the art academies themselves. Why is this so? And will they find their place more easily in the modular system?

Perhaps, as we are continuously discussing new models of art production and institutions, we should also discuss new models of art educational facilities, both in terms of architecture, structure and curricula. It is clear that the interdisciplinary must necessarily stand in opposition to a traditional division of art practices into particular genres or indeed disciplines, such as "painting" or the no longer so new "new medias", to name but a few. In order to address the situation that contemporary young artists, or cultural producers, face, we cannot rest on the pillars of tradition, neither within institutions, art production or methods of teaching. On the contrary, tradition seems quite counter-productive to our current endeavor: the assessment of new skills and tools for a re-contextualized art practice. **So, if we view art production as knowledge production rather than formal production, we will have to develop and define a different set of properties and parameters for discussion, production and evaluation.** And when we focus on art as a place "where things can happen" rather than a thing "that is in the world" we will see how an engagement between art production and critical theory becomes necessary and the education itself a multi-faceted interdisciplinary field that moves in many spaces as opposed to staying within one mode of production, or form. This is not to say that thinking doesn't take on a formal articulation or that research is always equal to art production, quite the contrary, since it is our particular property to understand content as form and vice versa. But the important shift that I want to emphasize is perhaps best described by Jean-François Chevrier, who has written of an "art conquering space", as it were, since the 1960s, that has facilitated a shift in emphasis from art objects to what he calls "public things". **[4]. This indicates how notions of audience, the dialogical, modes of address and conception(s) of the public sphere(s) have become the important points in our orientation, and what this entails in form of ethics and politics.**

This shift also entails, naturally, different notions of communicative possibilities and methods for the artwork, where neither its form, context nor spectator is fixed or stable: such relations must be constantly (re)negotiated, and conceived in notions of publics or public spheres. This means, on the one hand, that the artwork itself (in an expanded sense), is unhinged from its traditional forms (as material) and contexts (galleries, museums etc.), and on the other hand, is made contingent on a(nother) set of parameters that can be described as spaces of experience, that is, notions of spectatorship and the establishment of communicative platforms and/or networks in or around the artwork that are contingent on, and changing according to different points of departure in terms of spectatorship. The gaze of the spectator is, of course, not only dependent on the work and its placement, but also on the placement of the spectator socially (in terms of age, class, ethnic background, gender, politics etc.). Or, more broadly speaking, experiences and intentionalities. In turn, work, context and spectator influence the definition of each other. None of which are given, and each of which are potentially conflictual, indeed agonistic: One may or may not feel addressed, may or may not accept the mode of address, even, by a given work or a given situation (both artwise and socio-politically). When thinking about art production and representation, it is therefore crucial to negotiate these terms both individually and in relation to each other. We must, then, think of art in terms of a triadic model, rather than in terms of dialectics (such as form and content, tradition and desire, meaning and non-meaning, and so on). To the extent that such a model was presaged by parts of historical conceptualism, we are as much within an post-conceptual as postmodern era.

A contemporary investigation of how art and artists are produced must thus reconfigure the terms of theory and practice in a different way, and explore both what can be termed the practice of theory and the theories of practice (historical and current): What exactly is involved in an act of representation? What is, for instance, the relationship between artistic practice and political representation, that is, two different notions of representation? What are the possible positions within the artistic field for political representations and perhaps even actions, and which modes are productive and which counter-productive? And, furthermore, what is the relationship between the claimed autonomy of the artwork, and claims for political autonomy? But also: what is the relationship between representation and derepresentation? [5]. What are the correlations between strategies and formal expressions? What are, for example, the trappings and potentials of collective works and groupings compared to the role of the singular artist? How do you define your work vis-à-vis the apparatus surrounding art production and presentation? What is the public role of the artist, historically, presently and potentially? These discussions must revolve around the various tools and methods of representation available to us: how we can conceive of various modes of address, and how new narratives, and in turn subjectivities, can be constructed? This is also an adequate moment to repeat the classical question: To and for whom do we speak? And what are the differences in our conceptions and invocations of various notions of institutions, audiences, constituencies and communities?

If we look at the academy itself we have been handed down certain historical models, the idea of "free art" and the master class, namely one professor talking to multiple students and deciding what art education is. In terms of mode of address this is, of course, a pre-democratic model, a non-dialogical mode of address, based on the sovereign reigning his subjects, listening attentively to his master's voice (an inherently hierarchical and masculinist subject positioning). However, if artists are now to be engaged with the world and not just themselves and their desirous relationship to a tradition - which was, famously, Norman Bryson's definition of academism in classical art - we must question the relevance of this model and perhaps look more closely at the university model of several lecturers and certain curricula as instigated by the Bologna process. If we view the academy as a "teaching machine", to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak, we must ask, then, what kind of subjects (i. e. the students) and what kind of knowledge (i. e. the teaching) is produced. Presently, this has a heightened urgency, since we are importing the Anglo-American university system onto the traditional European academy model. It would be illusory to think that the implementation of a

modular system will in itself solve the problems and grievances we have with the historical master class. One will merely substitute a system of discipline with a system of control: whereas the traditional educational system is part of the disciplinary society, the new methods of examination, modules and internalization, can be seen as part of a society of control. Power is no longer exercised through discipline, as it is very concretely in the traditional academy with its disciplinarily themed departments and sovereign professors, but rather through a simultaneous diffusion of this power, making it less visible and personally identifiable, but double enforceable through various mechanisms of control and (self)surveillance, where you individually have to choose your course work, but according to a modular system installed in advance, and with various instances of evaluation and examination. This "educational system" of control is continued after graduation, of course, through how your work processes and advance in the artworld, or generalized field of cultural production, is structured. [6].

In this sense, the notion of the cultural producer, a contemporary artist figure, can be seen as complicit with these later developments within administration, politics and capital. The artists are a sort of social avant-garde, on the forefront of the risk society and the notion of immaterial laborers. As producers of knowledge universities are often mere teaching machines, reproducers rather than producers of knowledge and thinking, which is why we should not uncritically adopt their structures. Rather, one should learn from those structures as spaces of experience, as discursive spaces, and simultaneously to the implementation of its productive features, maintain the notion of unproductive time and space, which was potentially hidden in the academy model: where the traditional professorial reign meant that the professor in charge decided on methods and curricula (if any), he or she could naturally also allow for the students to do whatever they wanted, even doing nothing. Such is the total power of the sovereign: to be a good king or a bad king ... Reversely, the students could also take charge themselves and directly overthrow their professors in place revolutions (as inspired by the student riots of 1968), as actually witnessed in art schools throughout the 1990s, where students created so called "free classes", professor-less departments run by the students themselves. One should maintain such notions of a free space, of the laboratory, something that is not implied in strict course work and evaluation schemes. In this sense one has to move beyond knowledge production into what we can term spaces for thinking. Thinking is, after all, not equivalent to knowledge. Whereas knowledge is circulated and maintained through a number of normative practices - disciplines as it were - thinking is here meant to imply networks of indiscipline, lines of flight and utopian questionings. Naturally, knowledge has great emancipatory potentials, as we know from Marxism through psycho-analysis, but knowledge, in the sense being what you know, what you have learned, is also a limitation: something that holds you back, that inscribes you within tradition, within certain parameters of the possible. And thus with certain eliminations of what it is possible to think, possible to imagine - artistically, politically, sexually and socially. Secondly, the notion of knowledge production implies a certain placement of thinking, of ideas, within the present knowledge economy, i. e. the dematerialized production of current post-Fordist capitalism. And here we can see the interest of capital become visible in the current push for standardization of (art) education and its measurability, and for the molding of artistic work into the formats of learning and research. There is a direct corollary between the dematerialization of the art object, and thus its potential (if only partial) exodus from the commodity form and thus disappearance from the market system, and the institutional re-inscription and validation of such practices as artistic research and thus knowledge economical commodity. Obviously, even dematerialized artistic practices can be bought and sold as commodities on the art market, if the marketing of the artist figure - as hipster, as creator, as innovator - is done forcefully and strongly by the right agents, i. e. specific high end galleries. (The artists as pure sign value, we could even say, rejoicing with almost forgotten postmodern guru Jean Baudrillard ...)

In institutional terms, we have seen this witnessed in the merge between art, economy, fashion and academies in the uk, exemplified by the Thatcherite transformation of the art educational system into a cultural industrial complex, reaching its apex with the hegemonic position of Gold-smiths

College and the Young British Artists generation of artists in England in the 1990s. [7]. A similar tendency can be seen in other places and institutions (such as Yale and now Columbia University in the United States), and shows how the Anglo-American system of education, capital and culture, along with general political implementations of deregulation and state control, are exported from the us through the uk and into Europe. Internation-alization and harmonization of education also mean a normalization, and a possibility of transforming the educational sector into a competitive market. It is, in these cases - and one could easily mention European schools as well - quite obvious which system artists are educated for as well as within: one and the same. However, as indicated, it is also possible to think of education as a process of thinking, of unlearning certain modes of knowledge and production and subjectivity, of questioning these very structures rather than embracing them. It should be possible to think of educational spaces that are produced through subjectivities rather than merely producers of them. Or put in other words, not just producing artworld artists, but rather positions within as well as without the art world and its repetitious economies of galleries, collectors, markets, careerings, reifications, trends and circuits.

Notes

- [1] I am using the term cultural producers for two reasons, first to escape the limitation of art as object-based and market-driven, and secondly in order to refer to the larger framework of an entertainment or cultural industry, in which art production is now thoroughly based. So, on the one hand an unhinging from historical categories and limitations, and on the other a newer circumscription and delimitation.
- [2] The Bologna process refers to a eu declaration on education from 1999, which has been signed by 29 European countries so far. The goal is to create a European University standard of education, allowing for movement between countries and faculties, using the same ects point system and the standardization of the Anglo-American system of Bachelor and Masters degrees, following by a possible PhD in a so called three plus two plus three modular system. Within art education, there is currently a pan-European discussion on whether to follow this model, already in place in Great Britain, or whether to keep the traditional Franco-Germanic model of the art academy, without modules, but with each student attending the class of one professor, whose department is defined according to a specific artistic discipline (traditionally painting and sculpture department, and today most often with new media, video, public space etc. departments added for good measure).
- [3] See Peter Weibel (ed.), *Kontext Kunst*, Köln 1994, and Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics / Esthétique relationelle*, Dijon 1998.
- [4] The movement from object to public things, events, installations, utterings, situations etc. has been eloquently described by Jean-François Chevrier in his book *The Year 1967. From Art Objects to Public Things, Or Variations on the Conquest of Space*, Barcelona 1997.
- [5] By representation we mean a double movement of absence and presence, politically that someone is present somewhere, representing others that are absent, and artistically transferal and transformation in the sense of the emergence of an idea or sensation within an object, placed somewhere (else). By derepresentation, we are referring to the opposite movement, a presence or emergence that is removed or even erased. Something that can no longer be represented. It is thus not a matter of a discourse or subject position that cannot emerge in a given hegemony (as the ways in which the subaltern cannot speak), but rather of an active and effective removal of certain ideas and speech acts from the visible, from the possible, from the system of representation and signification as such.
- [6] Moving beyond the artworld and even the larger cultural industrial sphere, we will find that one of the political catchwords of post-Fordist, and even post welfare societies of core Europe is indeed "education for life", meaning education as an ongoing process, constant deskilling and

reskilling of labor, as well as a mode of production and productivity itself.

[7 Interestingly, a generation of artists that were all academy trained and socialized, indeed
] connected to the market, media and gallery system through the academy, emerged publicly as anti-academic in the sense of being anti-theoretical. The effects of the ba and ma system does not, then, indicate an increase in theoretical academic discourse, but is equally capable of maintaining and even cultivating the reactionary anti-theoretical artist subject of the traditional art academy. The main common feature, obviously, is connections: how artists enter the marketplace, i. e. the dealers-collectors network and economy of desire.