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In 1957 when the leftist painter and graphic artist Ben Shahn lectured at Harvard University, reflecting upon the possibilities and pitfalls faced by artists as they took up roles inside academia, he spoke in broad strokes and high tones. Whether the university milieu would free the artist or deaden him, whether universities would be the legitimators of artistic dilettantism, how artists would let the misunderstandings of the scholarly community affect them —these were the concerns that preoccupied him. Behind all of Shahn's concerns loomed the question of how the individual artist, then at the height of its status as a modernist archetype, would negotiate the ostensible welcome granted by the impersonal institution.[1]

But how artists might relate to and be a part of society's only institution dedicated to advanced learning and teaching was simply one of many large philosophical questions facing the American universities in their post-World War II growth spurt. The great

public universities, employing thousands of new scholars and researchers, with massive growth in enrollment, making higher education affordable to tens of thousands of first generation post-secondary students, comprised a significant sector of the post-WWII economic expansion. This was an expansion without an already closed agenda, as universities grew rapidly to serve the dual and not entirely congruent demands of an affluent, idealistic, and numerically expanding population, on the one hand, and a full range of industrial needs, also growing in type and complexity, on the other. And this happened in a rare period of systemic equilibrium and managed global conflict, when a cold peace pervaded the West under nuclear détente and the Liberal Consensus, which allowed for the United States to complete its domestic development agenda with massive public investments. It is in this historical context that the arts were brought widely into the modern world of American higher education and knowledge production, and in that sense be legitimized as a discipline.

Now, after ’68, ’89, and too many recent crises to rapidly shorthand, those high tones are lost forever. One agenda emerged over all others, a development we could call neoliberal. The basic logic is privatization of resources, the withdrawal of public support, and the instrumentalization of the institutional mission. The consequence is stratification. No longer politically open, the universities, as an advertised experience available for purchased admission, on the one hand, have been fully woven into the fabric of consumerist marketing. On the other, as bodies of production, they have been integrated into the market-driven manufacture of knowledge and knowledge workers, more and less explicitly. Combined with their continued close relationships with military research, and the allowance of business prospects to intrude in trajectories of basic research, the relationship between capitalist

interests and the universities is strong and intimate, even if occasionally uncomfortable.

It does not matter that the public universities turn neoliberal out of self-preservation, or that the campus uprisings of the Sixties and Seventies achieved real results in opening up the resources of the universities to traditionally marginalized groups. Throughout the Eighties and Nineties, the conservatives tightened their grip and strengthened the decades-long association of university governance with the wealthy, the well-connected, and the politically powerful. Who can forget the anti-apartheid disinvestment movement on U.S. campuses in the 1980s, when student activists were in places driven to disobedience by the conservative intransigence of university trustees, public and private? On an issue that history has judged definitively in favor of the activists, with few exceptions university and college administrations nationwide responded to the demands of justice and human rights in conservative and occasionally fascistic fashion.

The difference now is, the base has caught up to the superstructure. Capital investments make elite schools into educational resorts. The big public research universities tout investment and economic activity generated in order to justify state support while continually raising their costs to students to make up for shortfalls of funding from the frequently hostile state legislatures, upon which they depend for their dwindling public funds.[2] Most dramatically, rapidly increasing numbers of students from across the range of the educational world, from elite schools to junior colleges and trade programs, leave their student careers, successful or not, in a modern form of indenturedness due to the borrowing necessary to cover the skyrocketing tuitions and fees. These trends are likely to worsen markedly in the coming years as

draconian cuts in funding for public education from elementary through university are just beginning to be felt across the US.

These developments explain the bald instrumentalization of higher education, to the point of making Shahn's concerns for faculty artists inseparable from the more basic problem, that of their position in the wage labor economy of global capital. The particular conditions of the faculty workforce, split as it is into a two-tiered system of tenured and non-tenured persons, is further complicated by the peculiar position of artists, who may also draw for resources, opportunity, and recognition through an art market and non-academic art world, but a world also subject to market logics. When the socioeconomic realities of the universities under neoliberal duress are combined with the position of artists resultant of the internal logics of art and art history—supplemented by the broad streams of leftist humanism, two generations of continental theory, and the invasion of centers from all points on the periphery—the current contradiction becomes clear. As artists laboring in the world of higher education, we are implicated in and made to submit to the web of relationships governing the contemporary university and college. At the same time, the imperatives of our field teach us (in the name of creativity) to clarify, question, and critically rework on our own subject positions, including our positions as laboring educators. For artists, how and why people learn, how and why people teach, and how and why people conduct research are questions that are now bound to the crisis conditions of the public sphere as administered under the auspices of neoliberalism.

The perspective of artists on the destablization of institutional authority and the erosion of the universities as the locus of knowledge production can be seen in the proliferation of educational and research platforms based in an art identity, or

conceived and organized by artists. Even as experiments in both temporary and long-term institutional forms multiply, the dilemmas and contradictions remain. For example, in the area of art education at the post-baccalaureate level specifically, the outstanding issues now include the programmatic and curricular evolution of arts education in relation to politicized pedagogy, on the one hand, and in relation to a voracious art market that has come to rely on art schools for the production of instantly commodified novelty and ever-marketable youth, on the other. In short, the critical streak is alive and well in art education, but so are the demands of an art market that requires artists to practice the branding of themselves even during their training. Various programs, all in some sense competing against each other, have sprung up in recent years, rendering the once placid corner of academia belonging to the art schools and university art departments a perforated terrain. The MFA granting programs now bleed students and faculty into an unruly international menu of studio PhD programs and high profile independent study options—both part of the trend towards an ever more professionalized status of the artist. At the same time, increasing numbers of artists act on their dissatisfactions with conventional academic training by organizing and participating in scores of education-themed temporary exhibtions that incorporate practical elements, as well as grassroots anti-institutional projects that combine education and research.[3]

Though grassroots efforts are in general informed by a critical analysis of academic trends, in this ever-widening field of art and knowledge production it is not entirely clear where and how the oppositional currents run and the recuperative tendencies begin. What is for certain is that the crisis of the universities is pushing artists, in all their roles—as teachers, curators, writers, activists,

and entrepreneurs—toward new ways of structuring their domains in relation to the old university model.

There is plenty to be said about the predicament, but in a short text I must limit my closing thought to only one: the question of the students. Though Shahn sensed tension in the relationship between artists and academia from the beginning, he did not address the role of the students at all. In some ways this is surprising, considering that he remained through the end always grounded by his social activism. But what Shahn could not see has since become expected, if not overdetermined: students can, will, and should be a political force. Half a century ago, Shahn limited his query to the dangers of academia as a setting for avoiding art about controversial topics in times that cry out for dissent. Leftist artists with academic affiliation today might wonder aloud and in practical language, how can emerging student movements put to use the circuits, spaces, language, legitimation, creativity, and all the other now-standard tools made available to students of art? Embedded in this question is the additional task of accounting for the particular profile of the students who study art now: greatly weighted toward the female, mostly white, disproportionately queer, and tending to be urban dwellers. The subject position(s) of the students themselves will inform the ways in which they act out their politicization, and the likely roles they will play in movements.

For leftists there does exist reason for optimism. Even though the neoliberal agendas prevail, anti-capitalist currents within the university remain, given the remnant pockets of oppositional intellectuals and politicized labor, the expanding class of permanently precarious workers produced by the universities themselves, and, as I have noted, the students, who in their peculiar position as consumers and precariat-in-the-making, form a

sub-class of their own. The numbers and talents of those who make up this potential and sometimes actual resistance are not so small. The fact that increasingly there is crossover of academy-affiliated workers into non- or anti-institutional settings of sometimes genuine creative and autonomous knowledge production also bodes well, for in the struggles ahead partisans will need to identify and use as many bridges to engage a non-university public as they can. In this respect as well, as segments of advanced art education mutate into non-traditional and experimental forms and formats—as represented in publications, dissemination of ideas through global circuits of exchange, increasing self-legitimation, and participation by a combination of institutional and grassroots actors—ahead of other fields, students of art may have a particular role to play.

Whether individual sites of campus struggle get linked in any substantive, functional, and imaginative ways remains to be seen. Given the frequency and international dispersion of student action in the closing months of 2009, the opportunity for meaningful links may very well emerge.[4] The coordinated campaigns to defend public education in California on March 4, 2010, were particularly noteworthy for their inclusion of many secondary school youth and teachers, thus successfully resisting the tendency to split secondary and post-secondary constituencies, reminding us that vertical integrations among age and educational status groups in shared territory is as important as horizontal integrations across international borders. Looking to the secondary school constituencies for leadership better positions campus-based movements to defend attacks on the public sector in general. The danger is for the student movement to address only or primarily the cuts to university budgets, the raising of student fees, the employment prospects of graduates, and/or the ursurious financing

of one's post-secondary education, and thereby limiting itself as a special interest group.

Any gain in either outcome or political capacity that moves campus activism toward the long-hoped for transnational and multi-generational coordination of anti-capitalist political action would be a serious and much needed advance for the global left. This would be especially important in the US sphere, where the campuses have attracted so much capital investment, making them a political battleground once again, as systemic bifurcation becomes more pronounced with each passing season.

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[1] Ben Shahn, *The Shape of Content* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 73-91.

[2] Even the flagship public research universities in the United States now typically receive less than 25% of their operating revenue from unrestricted public funds. In the year 2008, for example, the University of Wisconsin-Madison received only 20.2% of its operating revenue from the State of Wisconsin. For the University of Michigan it was 24% and for the University of California-Berkeley 22%, from their respective state governments. Nearly everywhere in the US some conservative state legislators target the university for budget cuts every year, forcing the universities to justify its value in narrowly economic terms. The remainder of the operating budgets come mostly from restricted research grants, gifts and endowments, and rising student tuition. http://www.wisc.edu/about/facts/budget.php

http://www.vpcomm.umich.edu/budget/understanding.html
http://newscenter.berkeley.edu/news/budget/img/revenue0809.gif

[3] The studio PhD exists as an immature form, without clear standards. The independent study programs include such recognized brands as the Whitney Independent Study Program and the Skowhegan residency. AREA Chicago's Pedagogical Factory exhibition and workshop series at the Hyde Park Art Center is an example of an exhibition as learning lab. Mildred's Lane, an initiative of the artist Mark Dion and the designer J. Morgan Puett, is an example of an artist-run school for artists. Red76's Flying University is an example of education—peer delivered, informal, and essentially social—*as* an art project. Examples of grassroots and self-initiated schools and research projects include the Experimental College of the Twin Cities or EXCO, The Public School (in Los Angeles), and the roving seminar Continental Drift. For an excellent discussion of the MFA degree in relation to the proliferation of educational options see "The Currency of Practice: Reclaiming Autonomy For The MFA," *Art Journal*, vol. 68 no. 1, Spring 2009, pp. 41-57.

[4] The partial list of universities targeted by student actions around year end include the University of California, Los Angeles and Santa Cruz campuses; the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana; the University of Vienna and the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna; the University of Zagreb; Bern University. Between these various student-led struggles, there have been gestures of solidarity made, and some regional and national coordination (such as in Italy). But as far as I know, there have been no transnationally coordinated actions. Also worth an analysis is the seeming complete absence of connection made between the European and US student struggles and the ongoing student struggles in Iran.