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Artist as Teacher?

Boris Buden in conversation with Cornelia Sollfrank, Dmitry Vilensky and David Riff

It is obvious why we would be so keen on discussing the problems of teaching in the field of art and reflecting our own experiences in art universities and alternative art schools. This practice has lost that innocence it used to have earlier on, when not only art enjoyed its relative autonomy in a clearly structured society, but art education too had played just as clearly defined a role in the reproduction of the grand narrative of a universal history of art: to transmit and improve knowledge and the experience of art-making. But nothing is in its proper place nowadays, neither art within society nor society itself. Now the domain of art education has opened up to include knowledge and experiences from a broader range of cultural practices and theories, but it has opened to the logic of the (art) market, too. In other words, it is compelled to serve the interests of profit – a fate it shares with education in general in the era of its neoliberal transformation. However, individual artists have been involved in the same process, that is, exposed to the challenges of market recognition. They, too, have lost their proper place in society and now float freely with only one option left: to make it to the orbit of the art system – a transnational, hierarchically structured and market-related formation of values; the most sublime embodiment of artistic excellence, yet with no social reference whatsoever.

For an artist today, teaching is not simply a pedagogical supplement to his or her artistic "mission". Rather it has become, along with writing, researching, curating, climbing the academic ladder, launching entrepreneurial ventures (mostly by taking the intermediary role between capital and his or her own labour), etc. a matter of survival, often a compulsory activity that has got rid of all its idealist teleology, in short, merely wage labour. In the end, a teaching artist becomes a precarious worker, whose final product is new precarious workers, atomised wage labourers, whose only choice is to compete with one another – as well as with their teachers – in attracting the interest of mostly private capital. Finally, one cannot help but ask: what is the purpose of building up the pyramid of (artistic) excellence that is based on this social idiocy? However, people are not idiots. Nor have they completely lost their sense of human dignity. This is why they resist this miserable reality. In other words, entering the sphere of education, both as a teacher and/or student, the artist steps into a battleground. As we said above, one cannot teach art innocently today. This is only one more reason to critically reflect our own experiences in teaching (around) art.

1.
Motivations for an artist to engage in teaching activities are often very ambiguous. Although, under the pressure of neoliberal policies, being itself exposed to an extreme precariousness, teaching as a profession still seems to promise a certain level of control over one's own precarity. For instance, it offers a relatively regular income, a certain level of symbolic capital and thereby secures social status. One is not simply an artist, but rather becomes a professor. Therefore, the question arises: Would you ever teach without being compelled to do so by the material need? Secondly, if there are still motivations for teaching beyond these quite profane ones, how would you describe them?

2.
It seems impossible to enter the sphere of institutionalised education without coming into conflict, not primarily with the institution or with the system, but with one's own colleagues. In other words, one is constantly exposed to often brutal, obscure and principally unjust procedures of competition. While the lucky winner celebrates the alleged objective recognition of his or her own excellence, many of the defeated rivals feel like being at the mercy of an almighty authority, based on nothing but arbitrariness.

Is this a self-evident normality, which must be silently accepted if one really wants to teach? How can we think of professional collegiality and solidarity under these circumstances? Moreover, how can we think of a possible collective action – for which the absent solidarity is a precondition – which would be able to challenge these humiliating conditions?

Cornelia Sollfrank: No, art education is not about the artists who are teaching. It is about the students

Sollfrank: Before I try to answer your questions, I have to make a general objection against your introduction. I absolutely do not share the notion of 'innocence' that art and art education allegedly had in earlier times. This assertion does not consider that art's 'autonomy', an invention of the late 18th century, has always served a certain – highly political – purpose. The autonomous artist, the genius, was the glorification of bourgeois productivity itself. The creator ex nihilo corresponded to the vital, expansive and production-oriented attitude of the bourgeoisie. Within the logic of the economic division of labour, the artist was liable for providing the 'truth' – which also implied, more or less, salvific suffering. By accepting this role in society, artists fulfilled an important task. They stabilised the prevalent system of economic and political power. Thus, the correlation of art and the market dates back to the times when aesthetic autonomy was put into place – as has also been elaborated by Adorno.

By building the 'institution' of bourgeois art, art history has played a major role in constructing its grand narrative. This also implied leaving out or denying all attempts of artists and cultural producers to leave the ghetto of 'generously granted autonomy', including social and political engagement, for example, teaching. Simply declaring them as non-art or bad art, aesthetic attempts to seize other 'material', and 'forming' the traditional locations off-site, were eliminated.

A similar role can be ascribed to the art academies. They used to be the place where artists were 'produced', where 18th century notions of art were reproduced (and still are!). The disciplines were clear, education was based on the (male) master who would transfer his knowledge, either by some sort of spiritual assignment, usually accompanied by imparting practical skills.

Buden: Let me clarify my position on "innocence". Yes, you are absolutely right. There has never been an innocent art or art education. Moreover, there is nothing innocent in this world, or better yet, "only a stone is innocent", as Hegel once wrote. Clearly, in whatever proposition it occurs, "innocence" rarely generates truth-value. However, its cognitive value is often quite remarkable. In our case, I use it in terms of an "innocence lost", to designate a change in the state of mind – an increasing awareness of the complicity of (art) education in the process of neoliberal transformation, or in broader sense, of the complicity of the knowledge economy in the reproduction of the global relations of exploitation and domination. Take the example of the promise of mobility within the so-called European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a strategic goal of the Bologna Process reforms. Although we know too well that mobility is a precondition for the very existence of today's art system and for the general improvement of art education, we still cannot innocently identify with that promise. We also know that it is parallel to the regime of the severest restrictions of free movement for so many of our colleagues, artists, students, teachers and migrants from all over the world. In short, the EHEA is a Schengen Area at the same time. Or take the example of autonomy you have also mentioned – while earlier, the idea of autonomy of art was primarily understood in terms of an autonomous sphere of (essentialised) aesthetic or cultural values WITHIN society and as such provided relative protection from the direct political instrumentalisation of art, a quality that was often subjectively perceived and embraced as the "freedom of art" – although, as you rightly emphasise, this concept of autonomy was itself a form of political instrumentalisation of art serving the purpose of political and economic domination of, for instance, a particular social class – today's idea of autonomy increasingly takes on the shape of an autonomy

FROM society. It is society's commitment to (art) education as a branch of public services that is under attack now. What is at stake is the shift from industrial to cognitive capitalism. In the time of industrial capitalism, the apparatuses of education and learning were believed to generate some sort of social (republican, national, identitarian, etc.) value and were therefore seen as completely external to the sphere of enterprise and the marketplace. Bildung was socially embedded and always meant more than individual subject formation. Cognitive capitalism, on the contrary, integrates the process of education and subject formation into itself. Its system of accumulation focuses mainly on knowledge and creativity. Bildung is now an entrepreneurial activity of atomised individuals, a matter of their – and not of the society they are members of – own responsibility. This is what autonomy of (art) education means today – not an illusion of artistic and cultural freedom WITHIN society, but a realised freedom of capital FROM society. Schools, universities and other educational institutions are now at the forefront of capitalist accumulation. They have become the main tools of what Y. M. Boutang calls the "apparatus of capture" (of human subjects) for cognitive capital. The old illusion of autonomy offers no escape from this complicity. Those famous words of Patti Smith: "I am an artist, and I have no guilt", don't make any sense today. Recent student protests, open resistance to the managerial pressure on education, occupations of universities, new forms of self-organisation, etc. indicate what I call the end of innocence – a worldwide politicisation of "education". It is a historically new, highly contradictory and open-ended process. It is precisely this openness, this contingency of the actual historical situation that makes our particular experiences in the field of art education so important. This is where teaching art becomes learning history.

Sollfrank: Yes, I am particularly keen on discussing art education on the basis of my own experiences. I got to know several, highly different models as a student – plus the four years that I taught myself at different universities. The first three years were at a traditional academy, studying painting, in Munich. That was definitely the most annoying and unproductive phase. What used to be defended under the guise of 'freedom' was a highly ideological undertaking with the only purpose of sustaining a very limited notion of art – whilst avoiding a serious transfer of knowledge, i.e. working. After that, came four years in a more open-minded environment, which left teaching altogether to a sort of self-teaching, to the students. On top of that, until today, this particular art school gives honorary professorships to wealthy collectors... Interestingly, after 16 years of practice, I currently have the opportunity to continue my education doing a practice-based PhD in art at an art college, which is part of a university in the UK. Sometimes I feel like a dinosaur, having had the aforementioned 19th century art education experience in Germany, and then having been slung into the 21st century research-based art education at the university. To elaborate on the complex relationship between research, teaching and art practice, goes beyond the format of this little statement, but to put it in one sentence, in that environment teaching is far less prestigious than doing research here.

You also write that "teaching was simply a pedagogical supplement to the artists' artistic mission". I can agree insofar as all the art professors I had to bear with in my education were neither qualified to teach nor motivated to do so. Most of them were very frustrated because they had not performed well enough on the market and had only become professors rather than well-paid stars. And the most horrible thing was that they all had lifetime positions, no matter what they delivered in their jobs. I admit, that was 20 years ago, and things have slightly changed, even at the academies. One has even heard of female professors in the meantime, or professors who make an effort to actually teach! However, the 'art academy' is still an institution that works through inclusion and exclusion. As I have explained above, artists who want more than to just reproduce the notion of aesthetic autonomy – who, for example, understand teaching as part of their art practice, are thus motivated and engaged – cannot be included in the institution structurally, as they contradict its basic parameters.

But let me now answer your questions concretely. In the first one, you equal teaching with being a professor. This is a particular German perspective, at least a non-UK one, and is actually very much based on the notion of art education at the academy. Unlike in Germany, in the UK, art education is part of the regular university

system. You have to work your way up in the pyramid, which involves being a reader first, then a lecturer, then a senior lecturer, then becoming an assistant or associate professor before you can finally call yourself a professor and get the corresponding responsibilities, workload and salary. Such a career may easily take 10–15 years, even after a PhD. Getting a professorship in art, after a few years of professional experience and a few prestigious exhibitions, beyond having any academic or didactic skills is unthought-of in the UK in the meantime. This may have to do with the clearly structured teaching system that introduced the bachelor and master degrees a long time ago (unlike in continental Europe) – which simply implies that a lot of teaching has to be provided. So, while in Germany, almost none of my artist friends have the opportunity to make their money by teaching art. In the UK, all my artist friends have a teaching job at a university. This is due to the different structures, and I have to say that I currently, and particularly in this respect, prefer the UK system. Generating a decent income by doing some teaching is a reachable goal for those artists who want it. There are not only a few professorships for which too many artists compete, but there are a number of jobs which are, though less prestigious and less paid, available. Thus, the notion of the few chosen ones who are able to teach that thing that cannot actually be taught becomes obsolete. In that sense, teaching art can be considered regular wage labour, yes.

My answer to the question of whether I would also teach without being paid depends on the circumstances. Generally, I find it more interesting at the moment to teach than to produce artworks for the exhibition economy. First of all, teaching gives the teacher the opportunity to learn and provides the space for exchange with other artists, which is something very valuable. Then, when you have reached a certain age and maturity you/I feel the urge to discuss and pass some of my experiences on to the younger generation. That implies permanently recapping and rethinking one's own attitude.

Whether teaching is a fulfilling activity depends on the environment. One good teacher alone can hardly achieve anything; he/she needs an inspiring environment where several teachers give different inputs and challenge each other and the students to not just become followers but independent-minded personalities. As I used to do a lot of my art-related (politically motivated) activities without any payment at all, for example the Old Boys Network, TammTamm and others, I could very well imagine teaching without payment, but not at a state university of course, rather in a self-organised, 'autonomous' context, i.e. I would be particularly motivated to teach without payment if I had the feeling that my work would have an impact and could lead to further powerful activities. I would also teach unpaid for people who – for whatever reasons – cannot afford to be part of or have no access to the very privileged art education system. And, of course, I could only do that if I would find myself in the position to be able to afford to do so.

To summarise, one could best say that teaching makes you part of a larger context, the institution or non-institution in which you are teaching. You have the opportunity to learn in that context by teaching, you can work to convince others to better understand your notion of art, and last but not least, you can help to educate a young generation of artists. I agree that art education is a battleground, in the sense that the art school, academy, college or university is one of the places where art politics are made; a notion of art is planted into the students' heads. At the same time, one of the big misunderstandings of art education is that it is about the artists who are teaching. No, it is not. It is about the students. The time of their studies is a most valuable time; it should be taken seriously and instead of teachers fighting each other, I would prefer to see teachers who offer their knowledge to the students, share their experiences and put them in a situation where they can decide for themselves what path they are going to follow – the one of the artist entrepreneur, performing the genius for the art market, or the critical, socially and politically engaged artist who always has to struggle to find support for her work.

Buden: Do you really believe that such a choice is a matter of one's own free will – nowadays, when it has become almost impossible, not only for an individual artist, but for the system of art education itself, to escape the market and the logic of entrepreneurship? Or it is rather a matter of collective political action? How far

can a teacher go in the political mobilisation of her students? Just to remind you: Walter Benjamin (in "The Author as Producer") urged intellectual workers to betray the apparatus of production – in our case, the apparatus of education – and stop supplying it. Rather they should find a way to organise the process of production by themselves. Does it make any sense for you today?

Sollfrank: I have do admit that I cannot think of any model that would exist 'outside' of any market logic. We know, for example, that socially and politically engaged art also has its own market where name branding especially plays an important role. While the conventional art market is based on buying and selling commodities, this branch of the market is based on buying and selling critical attitudes – which should, of course, not be so critical as to question the economic system that guarantees its own survival. I think it was Lucy Lippard who coined the term "museum-quality" resistance, which says it all. But she also left a field of agency open, when she wrote: "art that is too specific, that names names, about politics, or place, or anything else, is not marketable until it is abstracted, generalized, defused" (2001). And despite the changes you address, it is my experience that this is still true today.

That leads me to your Benjamin quote – which has accompanied my whole professional life. My personal 'solution' is a permanent balancing act in which I combine a critique of the apparatus – one might also call it 'institutional critique' – from inside with experiments on structures outside. The critical inside-perspective alone is problematic, because it can easily be co-opted and eventually contributes to the revival of the institution. I appreciate the new possibilities we have through the Internet, for instance, for experimenting with new models of organisation. This is an ongoing process and we already have a lot of positive examples. But the model of self-organisation that you mention as a possible solution also has its limits, not only in terms of finances. I prefer to traverse both models to create a friction through the crossings. Betraying the apparatus does not mean leaving it alone, but making use of it for one's own purposes, abusing it.

Regarding "collective political action": I am not sure what you mean. Of course, you cannot do anything by yourself. You need associates. But how should "collective political action" free you from any market logic? You can probably build an alternative structure, but this will also have an economy.

A general boycott of tuition fees could generate a lot of trouble and discussion, and there have been great examples. As students are paying fees now, they are gaining power. And if students would decide to pay their fees to an alternative model, it could really be the starting point for a new teaching facility.

Political mobilisation through an authority (teacher) is a contradiction in my understanding. The task of a teacher is to rather procure that students gain self-confidence, that they know how to obtain information and to support discrete thinking. But maybe we are in the difficult situation where teachers are more critical than students?

The battleground situation you describe in your introduction sounds like an extreme, but it reflects the structural problem I already mentioned above. Artists who want more than to just reproduce the notion of aesthetic autonomy – for example, understanding teaching as part of their art practice, thus being motivated and engaged – cannot be included in the institution structurally, as they contradict its basic parameters. Finally, all these little genii have to defend their ground and fight each other. The competition between artists may be the worst, yes. Envy and disfavour seem to rule, carefully implemented in the heads of artists as part of a long tradition of individuality, i.e. politically motivated unsolidarity. In my mind, that is part of what you called 'innocent' earlier on!

I have consciously worked against that notion all my professional life, building networks, creating and experimenting with forms of getting organised – specifically for artists. And over time, you get to know your crowd! You learn to distinguish between the artists who work in the spirit of mutual support, and those who only use your invisible work to promote themselves. My strategy is to ignore the latter and focus on the ones

who understand the quality and necessity of mutual support. It exists – even in the completely corrupt and evil art world! And isn't it always the successful projects that fail?

Dmitry Vilensky: We Teach With Our Works And Our Lives

Vilensky: Thanks for addressing such important questions, but I am not sure if I am the right person to speak about these issues. Actually, I work outside of proper academic settings. I have never studied, neither art nor theory, I have no degree. In short, I feel like a bastard who always comes in from the back door, because I am too loud. And I was never afraid of doing different things that I never learned but felt the urgency to do. As someone who is self-taught, I became a professional artist and a member of an artistic collective in Russia where the average teachers' wage in the 1990s was about 100 Euros–which only recently increased to 300-400 Euros, a token reward for most of the teachers' loyalty to the authorities, but it is still below the average wage in St. Petersburg.

Doing many different things as an artist, activist and cultural producer, I am currently able to survive outside of the conventions of the gallery and art world. And frankly, I have never encountered a representative of private capital in my career. Instead, I have solely relied on different forms of public funding. It is not easy to survive – and it is also a personal choice – if you don't want to subjugate your activity to certain conventions or if you have a demand for changing the system.

I can recount similar things regarding my teaching experiences. I have taught at dozens of Western art academies. In my current situation I am not striving to get a stable position at any art academy. I would prefer to raise money and open a collective school, or to do it for free and build stronger relations with the younger generation. In short, I am more or less OK with these temporary contracts, because they usually mean teaching in a good environment. Most of the institutions I am invited to teach at are already infiltrated (to a certain extent) by friends, sympathizers and comrades who try to promote similar values in art and politics. So it is important to support them in their efforts.

Buden: But why do these institutions actually invite you at all?

Vilensky: Ask the institutions. I think it is because, like other artists involved in teaching activities, I have developed a certain body of work that seems to be important for the current historical moment of contemporary art. I did not make it on my own, since I am a member of a collective. In fact, I am an artist who programmatically does not produce art alone but consistently does so within a framework of collective practices. I am always looking to initiate different forms of collaboration. People want me to share this experience. Of course, one can ask how it is possible to represent a collective in an adequate manner. I agree that we are often limited by an economy of invitations. We regularly support each other and have been doing shows with installations where three or more of us are present, but for the guest teaching contracts it is not yet customary to invite more than one person. However, I am always happy when we manage to insist on inviting at least two members of the group – one researcher and one artist. It really works better in dialogue.

So I think that I can share a unique experience from the margins of the art world and try to seize every chance to use such an institutional invitation for promoting our values and to bring them into a discussion with as large of an audience as possible.

Buden: But what about the conflicts in this field - I mean the different often opposing interests and ideas among artists, including of course the so-called teaching artists, that cannot be suppressed even if they share a common, let's say "ideological" ground, that is, a common cause in art and politics?

Vilensky: At the moment, I have not experienced a situation of confrontation among people who share a common ground, or at least not in a direct manner. Of course there is some competition even within the same network, but because I see our networks in serious confrontation with the mainstream of the art world and academia, I feel that mutual support and sharing resources are very present – a bit like a mafia family.

So for me, the battleground is located outside – that's exactly how I understand the situation in art practice in general. I still believe that we – those who are not oriented towards the production of art as a commodity and who insist on its emancipatory, critical function; those who do not simply advocate the so-called social function of art, but are also very active outside the art world are all involved in a battle--but the question is: a struggle for what? Is it the same struggle for hegemony in which one can either take a position of power or counter-power? Or is it more complex nowadays? In any case, I am sure that we need to break with homogenous ideas about what art actually is. Art is an ambivalent praxis and consists of strong oppositions. On the one hand, it is part of the hegemonic ideological superstructure, on the other, it could become a sort of radical education – in short, the practice of human emancipation that uses the power of art to imagine, analyze, create, dream, visualize.

Buden: But what does that mean concretely, I mean for you as a teaching artist?

Vilensky: Concretely, it means that I stand for an expanded concept of education. For the most part, we artists don't merely teach through our positions at the academies – very few of us have anything like this – instead, we teach with our works and our lives. So we should consider the inseparable unity of works of art, educational practices and our everyday lives. All of these spheres must be politicized. To me, participating in the art world means to principally insist upon treating art as a very important tool for influencing how people understand themselves and the world they live in. I would suggest approaching this educational situation from the position of a political educator who uses artistic instruments to open up situations. As an artist, I think I should primarily teach how to approach the so-called formal issues in a political fashion – I still believe that these formal questions provide the unique way to move forward.

Buden: But what exactly do you mean by these “formal issues” - the so-called formal questions of art production that seem to have nothing to do with any political content, but still are important politically?

Vilensky: An artist always expresses her position through the creation of a form. Even if someone destroys the form and introduces this deconstruction to the field of art, it becomes an attempt to create a new formal order. It was like that throughout the entire modernist period and it is still like that nowadays. It is a difficult situation when “starry-eyed” artists see no difference between art and life. Right now I am speaking of a different version of community-based art, interventionism, public commissions for art in public spaces etc. – they are somehow convinced that form is not an issue and that it is a conservative, irrelevant approach, but they are wrong. This attitude is confusing and I seriously think this undermines not only the power of their creative enunciation but also the power of their social influence. You do not need to be an artist to work with social reality – you need to be a committed social worker who could certainly use any creative method at hand. This is an extremely important activity that is comparable with the work that doctors do. But society doesn’t only need medical specialists and social workers, it also needs art and science. This is not a need for a leisure activity or for embellishing the shabby everyday of the rich. People need art that can become a social reality. In a sense, art has the power to inspire people. It has the power to envision different forms of life and community, to become discontent with the current state of things on an aesthetic level. That’s what art is about and this is why it is a question of form.

This is closely related to the issue of education, because art as fiction cannot relate merely to social reality. It must also relate to the history of the development of art. Activists and social workers could not give a shit about art history. Artists cannot.

This is why we all need to learn many things about art. This can be done in the old schools or outside of them. However, the most important thing that needs to be done is to establish our own temporary schools based on certain principles and that are open to everyone interested in participating and furthering this agenda. I would say that the goal is to establish our own forms of organization in the field of art production and education and the most challenging way of doing so is to fuse these two functions into one.

Buden: That all sounds very optimistic. However, it seems that today's artists, as well as the institutions of art education, are now more exposed than ever to the logic of the capitalist market, that is, to an overall commodification of everything, including art education, which wasn't always the case.

Vilensky: I can hardly share your view of a "golden age" when everything was better, stable, outside of the logic of the market and so on... I also do not believe in the idea that certain practices were once innocent and have now lost this quality.

I just know that about 20 years ago, the world was completely different. There were 100 times (or more) less academies and art students and the majority of the academies were ultra-conservative – and they still are today in Russia. They primarily taught craftsmanship based on a particular discipline, which has been completely adapted to fit the logic of the market. From my point of view, the situation is totally void of any comparison. I am not talking about what was and is better or worse. I am simply saying that there is nothing to compare.

Buden: But wouldn't you say that, for instance, the massive precarisation that is currently penetrating the entire field of art production and art education has generally worsened the situation of artists, art students and teachers?

Vilensky: To me, art is a precarious practice by definition. That's why it is so powerful; I am not sure that we need to demand any form of stable working conditions for the artist. Instead, we should demand decent living standards for everyone, together with other wageworkers. But if this is not yet the case, I think that, to a certain extent, the artist needs to live through the tensions of real life. And from my point of view, most Western artists are still backed by an incomparable form of protection of rich states and capital. They have a very privileged position in their own societies and, of course, internationally. *This* fact creates a general inequality between cultural producers who share the same ideological platform, as you mentioned before.

I would say that there is no reason to look back and I believe that we should see this development more dialectically. We should constantly remember that we live in a time, like others before, that is paradoxical: on the one hand, we are much closer to embodying utopias and, at the same time, they are emerging through a false mode of realization –through so-called "communism of capital." Nonetheless, I do not have any illusions, because we do live in a reactionary time and we should consider what is possible to do in this situation. As long as we remember the other long reactionary periods in history, we can recognize how it could be conceivable to gain some meaning for the future. So it is not pointless to speculate about the artist's mission. This could be an opportunity to get out of the trap of depressive speculation about self-exploitation and precarity.

Buden: This sounds a bit romantic - to really develop his or her creativity, an artist must first face the bottom of life, must personally experience its worse miseries like poverty, exclusion, total social insecurity, etc.

Vilensky: I would not like to romanticize this. I would rather see it as realistically as possible. These are the living conditions of most of the people in our world. Of course, one can share the pain of the world from the windows of the restaurants at five-star hotels, but I am not sure that this can function as a model for a socially engaged position. Artists and creative workers are always the privileged ones, even if they are as poor as others in a society - and this privilege must be perceived as a mission and a responsibility.

How can we carry on without fear? I am trying to understand why creative workers look so frightened today and where this fear comes from. Artists have often experienced completely miserable situations and still managed to create terrific work, but nowadays everyone is speaking of fear and trying to establish normative stability in the face of this dramatic change. It looks as if we have forgotten an old maxim: where there is a danger there must also be salvation. You know, I come from Russian society where political and social closure is quite obvious but I must admit that at the same time there are still so many opportunities there, or better, it is still possible to invent them. I hope that it is clear that I am not talking about an American dream where everyone can become a millionaire. On the contrary, I am talking about an opportunity for establishing forms of life that are not subjected to the iron logic of the market and the corporations. Such structures are ingrained in education – this is even their primary goal. I also do not believe in all the speculation about de-subjectification. It sounds very nice: *"become nobody, demand nothing"*-- one could certainly appreciate it as an individual or in a micro-group, but politically it is a dead end.

I am not talking about start-up logic either – but even these forms of economic self-empowerment are lacking among artists (e-flux is a rare example of this model). What we need now are new forms of institutions that are politically organized and that provide openings to the participatory dimension of collective activity.

Buden: I also mentioned that conflicts among colleagues, friends, comrades that seem to be a necessary byproduct of the merciless competition, a characteristic of the market economy in the age of neoliberal transformation that has also saturated the entire field of art education.

Vilensky: I have already commented on this, but I am inclined to agree with what you said, because I am sure that you know better. As I mentioned before, I definitely think that on a practical level we might not need to insist on long-term contracts with big wages for a small aristocracy of immaterial laborers. Instead, I would suggest that we demand good conditions for temporary work. Could this be a solution to avoid the merciless competition for one steady job position? But there is a much deeper reason for this situation. At the moment, I do not know of any school that is based upon certain politics in art – or of one that even promotes a certain type of aesthetics. It is always a combination of whatever is considered good or professionally acclaimed, and this situation definitely puts us far away from any idea of solidarity and mutual support. So I repeat again: we first need our own schools with clear profiles before we can even try to develop noncompetitive models within these structures. What we need are new models based on a real struggle around the existing system of values and not around a piece of bread that is conditioned for us by someone else, by the authorities, the corporations or whomever.

David Riff: Just Maintenance Work

Riff: I teach art history at a luxury department store in Moscow, so I have to agree with pretty much everything you said in your introduction about the commoditization of knowledge and the reduction of education and scholarship to wage labor. Though sometimes, I think that it's just maintenance work, to use the term of conceptual artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, like most operations performed in the art world. Art education might be little more than a service byproduct bundled with the real luxury commodity, the actual art fetish. This is how I feel when I go up to the somewhat shabby back office on the fifth floor of the luxury store, behind Gucci, Armani, Samsonite, and the customer service department. As I enter the cramped space with its faulty projector, I am more like a cleaning lady than a living commodity. This is dirty work, unrecognized reproductive labor. But once I have spoken for three hours, I no longer know who or what the main commodity was here: the gallerina cadres who leave my class reading Foucault or Naomi Klein, raving about Robert Smithson and Yael Bartana? The objectified "knowledge" I gave them, selling out my personal idols and my friends? (They pay $100 per lesson, so it's ostensibly them who are consuming more than they

would at a spa, making me into some kind of avant-garde cook or exotic performer, juggling jpgs, factoids, and questionably subjective interpretations, for about $50 an hour.) Am I a suitcase? Or maybe we together are perfume, a special scent that makes you guess at the endless depth of something that might ultimately be empty, emanating from some indefinable location called art?

Strangely enough, my other job at the Rodchenko School for Photography and Media Art makes me ask similar questions. Even in the more disciplinary setting of the fledgling art school, the economic categories are also blurred, and it is not so easy to see at which point on the economic chain knowledge production is actually commoditized. It is nice to think of students as potential contemporary artists, and really, the desire and demand for precisely for that living commodity seems to motivate art education on the whole. The economic need for new artists is especially dire in Russia, where an art market boom went hand in hand with a total destruction of art education. The Rodchenko School is probably the biggest exception to an otherwise fully privatized educational landscape, largely consisting of things like my gig at the luxury store, which have proliferated since the crisis hit, to provide former collectors with a cheap consumer-friendly alternative to actually buying art. In that setting an art school must try to satisfy the real systemic demand for new artists, new professionals, "vielsagende-[govoryashie]-eminent new names," commodities that will finally answer Marx's mysterious question: what would the commodities say if they spoke? What could they say to make people buy or support them despite a universal precarity?

But when I look at my silent students, I think I might be producing "faulty" commodities. Even the most intelligent ones are likely to become educated audiences rather than producers. They will go on to work in other fields, or simply remain as erstwhile consumers of contemporary art's more sophisticated forms of infotainment, where you actually need a working knowledge of art institutions and a grasp of art history to be a consumer at all. Education expends far more students than it creates professional producers. Actually, you see the most intense moment of expenditure – where you really feel a new version of the old Fordist shock and awe of production, where machines are churning and clanking – once we really begin to discuss, once we begin to produce knowledge together, forming a constituency around whatever apparatus of knowledge we reinvent in that moment, the moment when we go from the reproduction of knowledge to its production, to the real work of an art school.

I would actually list this moment among the real motivations for teaching beyond material compulsions: the moment in which the educators themselves are educated, and dialogue becomes possible in something that no longer resembles a corporate training. But actually, neo-liberalism would not be what it is today if its cutting edge did not know how to reintegrate precisely such pedagogies. The dominant narrative is that such participatory knowledge production adds immeasurable value to the vaunted commodity of some mythical contemporary artist who is sitting there, as of yet unaware of his-her exclusive fate, sucking up all that common knowledge along with everybody else, getting ready to privatize or singularize a communal articulation. But I suspect that the real extraction of surplus value takes place elsewhere: when real knowledge production (and not reproduction) add value to the neoliberal institution and its location (*Standort*), a value that eventually – in the strategic perspective – can be turned into money directly, to the direct profit of the school itself and its investors qua owners. In those moments, we can think of both teachers and students as workers, serving a common employee. But for now, this is little more than a hunch, and I think we need more analysis of the methods and agents of knowledge commoditization to say so, depending on the particular system at hand. We would probably discover that there are multiple commodity mechanisms at work to allow each concrete undertaking a certain profitability and lifespan.

I think we need such analyses, and I am always afraid that we can't supply them, so we resort to notions like universal precarity. Though I agree in principle. Of course, everything and everyone today is systemically precarious. So what? The art school where I teach is experimental, rests financially upon upper middle class investment and municipal funding, and could be shut down at any moment. And? What about my upper class

gallerinas in the luxury store? For starters, their parents could all go broke. The owners of the luxury store included. Even if everyone stays afloat, involvement in the art industry means cognitive proletarianization the second they start to answer fifty emails a day, no matter what their class origins. But when I tell them this to keep them reading "The Shock Doctrine" beyond chapter one, it is an embedded Marxist's flattery: I am still poor and they are still rich, no matter how much I try to convince them that they are becoming proletarians. In fact, some of them brought my employer flowers on the last day, to congratulate her on carrying out such a successful course for the luxury store, whose owners also own a famous Western auction house. I was dismissed like a cleaning lady.

Buden: Only one additional question. Reading your account about "teaching art in Moscow today" one cannot avoid feeling that the situation you describe is rather typical for the practice of teaching (art) in a neoliberal environment anywhere in the world and for that reason quite familiar. But at the same time, that particular location – late post-communist Moscow – gives an impression of being at the same time quite strange, foreign or even a bit scary for the Western gaze. To describe such a situation, Freud would have probably used the notion of the uncanny, meaning an atmosphere where a situation appears to us at the same time familiar and foreign. Yes, we know very well that this is how teaching functions in neoliberal capitalism. Yet there is somehow too much of that truth in your story; it is like a sort of paroxysm of everything we already know about it. Yes indeed, we know that the knowledge that surrounds and generates art production today has become merely a commodity, and that those who (re)produce that knowledge are nothing but wageworkers working for the benefit of the capital owners, but "like a cleaning lady in a department store" ... !? As you know, "uncanny" in Freud's original is "*das Unheimliche*." So, a really correct translation would be rather "unhomely." What or who is (not) at home in your story, neoliberal capitalism, art or art education, the West or East, you, your profession or mission?

Riff: Olympia becomes uncanny when her true nature is revealed, when she stops being a bachelor's secret, when she looks at you directly, causing a scandal in the salon. Today's bachelors are the new Russia's Stepford wives, and their mechanical doll is a married man from the West who tells them stories about art and blindness. Too much truth indeed. Yet so familiar, so mundane. The department store was my home away from home, a place of clandestine experiments that I can't do anymore because since we started writing this text, they fired me. I couldn't be there week in, week out due to visa restrictions, and because, presumably, they had grown tired of my (post-)communist posturing. But I really miss teaching there. After me, they hired a young painter who just wrote his PhD on Tintoretto. On his Leipzig School type canvases, parading Stalinist figures do the Hitlergruss (salute Hitler).

Since being fired, I've thought about it a lot, who or what is at home in my story? It's an important question. The domestic worker is an anonymized, mechanical homemaker. Her or his job is to make things cozy, to maintain a secure space for clandestine, repressed, secret agendas that are not her or his own. That task could be left to a robot, if only robots exuded anonymous warmth. It involves the maintenance of knowledge - in the broadest possible sense – as a kind of fixed capital; a certainty of that this is what things are and how they should be. That lies in direct contradiction to the other task of the educator, the constant need to destroy or unsettle that domestic space, to raise questions, to introduce things that seem bizarre at first, and only later become habitable. So I constantly have to ask myself: where is it that my students feel most at home? What is it that I have to challenge? And which space should we later inhabit? And that's where things get really strange. The space I am supposed to maintain and disrupt as "home" is very specific, and won't seem unhomely or uncanny to Western readers, precisely because it is really unfamiliar, maybe even bizarre. Why are the Russian nouveaux riches so interested in art? Because some of them still remember their painting classes and their music lessons around the corner, those endless lectures about Cezanne's micrologies of color, perhaps even applied to socialist realist pictures of Lenin and co.

I am talking about the massive Soviet art education program, its abjectness, its seediness, its homemade homeliness. This isn't some nice story we can fetishize as revolutionary avant-garde culture (VKhUTEMAS, InKhuK), but seventy years of mistakes and grandiose efforts, of "art belongs to the people" put into practice, not just as formal daring, but also as unabashed kitsch and trash and glory, for better or for worse. Soviet art education perpetuated the long 19th century in a way that would make even Eric Hobsbawm gasp. Odilon Redon. Maurice Denis. You name it. Dada still shocks. Dali still appeals. Art – and especially if it isn't "contemporary" – gets to be unabashedly sexy in a cheesy softcore way, it gets to be haptic, it gets to be romantic. And that counts for contemporary art, too: things that an ordinary aesthetic education would prevent. But it also introduced elements of genuine communist culture, where everyday life began to resemble art, where many enterprises had their own museum full of folk conceptualism and DIY (samodeyatel'nost', as it was called). And that, in turn, generated very specific conception of aesthetic self-education. I don't want to romanticize it too much, but I would say that the very strict academism of the Soviet system – prevalent to this day – generated a counter-tendency that took its place in everyday life and that inherited an avant-garde approach to the production of knowledge: working groups, affective communities, a little like Tolkien fans, studying all this weird stuff. Not that always led to great results. But this samodeyatel'nost' DIY hobbyhorse art burned up the free time of the late Soviet period. This was self-education for its own sake. You could spend 20 years reading Hegel like my friend Dima Gutov. Some people still do it today. Sometimes I think that this is the attitude my Olympia Stepford wives and my Olympia camera wielding photo students would feel at home in. A timelessness of sorts that we'd like to maintain, and inevitably wind up breaking. Maybe that experience will be useful when it all falls apart.