

## Contradictions

Education, negotiations, institutions & the question mark within

Nora Sternfeld

In the sphere of art and exhibitions, increased attention has recently been devoted to the mediation of art. Documenta 12 was accompanied by two large publications dedicated to the mediation of art, whereas Irit Rogoff even speaks about the “educational turn in curating”. Education as a critical practice has been attributed an emancipating potential.

Rogoff focuses on the intermediate spaces and the spaces of action where publics are created and where unusual encounters take place. In this way museums and exhibitions sometimes depart from their paternalistic histories as spaces with open doors for everybody and they become public spaces intended for everybody: they become places of critique and agency.

At the same time, institutions are under growing pressure due to prevailing neoliberal conditions. Therefore, education in connection with exhibitions has many other tasks: sponsors must be convinced that the mediation of art increases the value of their investment, institutions must fulfil their educational task, uncertain working conditions must be accepted, and last but not least, visitors must become interested and eventually satisfied. How radical, under such conditions, can education be? Where is the position of the mediation of art in the old conflict between the institutional critique and institutionalisation? And how can education be meant[effected? realised?] as a rebellious, reflective practice leading to changes?

The statement will focus on everyday work with and on contradictions in the field of art education.

I want to bring up the idea of contradiction as the position of a “question mark within” the situation for which we are working and/or fighting. In a *Poter*[?] for the Viennese Magazine *Bildpunkt*, the Argentinian artist collective etcetera develop this idea of a “question mark within” at a 1997 demonstration in Buenos Aires.

(photo 1)

etcetera, not doing everything, *Bildpunkt*. Magazine of the IG Bildende Kunst Vienna, Summer 2008, p. 16-17

The term “contradictions” in the context of this text (as a question mark within) means different things:

- The reality of political discourses, tight budgeting, and pressure to attract visitors in a cultural field that operates with radical chic, on the one hand, and high expectations regarding service, on the other
- Education as a way of negotiating different positions within art, institutions, people, theory, and activism; and
- Critical education as *parrhesia*, as a way of talking back.

### 1. Working in Contradictions

The reality of political discourses, tight budgeting, and pressure to attract visitors in a cultural field that operates with radical chic, on the one hand, and high expectations regarding service, on the other.

Since the early 1990s – in the context of the reflexive turn in the new museology and positions of institutional critique in the field of contemporary art (think about Andrea Fraser’s performances for example) – the theory of art mediation became reflexive: We discussed a lot about our work, our conditions and our authorship and authority, we asked “Who talks? Who has the authorisation to speak and who is reduced to listen? Who is defining representation and who is only the object of representation? We did read some texts together, discussed Foucault, talked about disciplines and agency...

All this took place in the shadow of the art and exhibition field. It was part of the system but seemingly not of the “art world”. For the chic and theoretical “art world” education appeared uninteresting, unglamorous, tedious. It was one of the early jobs with precarious conditions in the cultural field: mediators are paid by workshop-hour or by guided tour, depending on the booking conditions. So you have to have a lot of time to be present when a booking is coming in. Then you have to learn a lot, create concepts, take a lot of time, and you do it largely without any guarantees regarding how much you stand to gain. Need I say it is feminised work?

Then suddenly, in recent years, we have been experiencing a certain hype of educational topics in the exhibition field: Irit Rogoff even speaks about an educational turn in curating. Several exhibitions, summits, arty magazines and conferences discovered the field of critical or radical education and art mediation.

I don’t want to be misunderstood as speaking from a position of resentment. I am relating this not because I want to say that I was there before the hype or something similar. I am simply trying to analyse the current situation from within the field. And here we have to say that the new interest in “radical education” did certainly not change the institutional conditions of insecure work or of high expectations regarding service. Art mediators are still seen as very close to the children they are at the same time required to discipline. They have to be nice, look good and always have time for visitors – if they want to keep their job. The only difference is that now we are confronted with this discourse of criticality. We are – as Irit Rogoff claims – very much inside the conditions we are criticising.

So art mediation became a very contradictory practice.

One example:

(photo series 1)

trafo.K & Gabu Heindl: Wild Translation

trafo.K was invited to do a site-specific education project at the Centre d’Art Contemporain, Genève. Together with the curators—the Swiss mediation collective microsillons—we decided to work with a group of 30 13-year-old schoolchildren from the German school in Geneva. Whereas we represented an approach that was both open and conceptual, and wanted to treat the students as education experts in order to develop possible forms of action based on their perspectives, the students themselves preferred to tinker and build. We tried, as best we could, to bring the exhibition and its critical questions concerning education into our discussion. On the basis of our collaboration, the children developed various models based on exhibition works and themes. The results were neither particularly reflexive nor very conceptual. But they did suggest some imprecise and wild forms for addressing critical themes of the exhibition in sometimes open, sometimes uncritical ways. The pupils reacted to the artworks in the exhibition by rebuilding their ideas in their own ways, and we called this a form of “wild translation.”

When the project came to an end, we were left with a number of questions – about the institution, about our position, and about the topics we discussed. So we decided – together with our collaborator, the Viennese artist and architect Gabu Heindl – to make the contradictions and our questions a crucial part of the project. We then re-

acted to the reactions of the pupils by asking questions as educators and mediators about the artworks and about the work of the pupils.

To the questions of the exhibition I would like to add two others:

What are the working conditions of educators and mediators?

How to transgress the dichotomy between the production and the reproduction of knowledge?

## **2. Producing Contradictions**

education as a way of negotiating different positions within art, institutions, people, theory, and activism

In the second part of my statement I would like to focus on the fact that contradictions can be a task of art education:

When we see institutions and exhibitions as public spaces, contradictions and conflicts should be a crucial part of what they are. Jorge Ribalta writes about mediation as the “Construction of Publics”<sup>1</sup>, offering: “We think that what our contribution to a radically democratic public sphere is, quite simply, to be self-critical and open to debates.”

Against this background education can be a work that provides spaces of negotiation.

For James Clifford exhibitions and institutions can be understood as “contact zones”, where different positions are debated and disputed. He develops his analysis from a postcolonial perspective to ethnographic museums, showing that “it is inadequate to portray museums as collections of universal culture, repositories of uncontested value, sites of progress, discovery, and the accumulation of human, scientific, or national patrimony”. He claims then that there must be museum strategies that are confronting this view.

“A contact perspective views all culture-collecting strategies as responses to particular histories of dominance, hierarchy, resistance, and mobilization.”<sup>2</sup>

And “When museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structures as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship – a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull”<sup>3</sup>.

We can see museum education and art mediation as a form of involvement in this power-charged set of exchanges. From this point of view education can be a practice of discussing and negotiating and also of transcending, contesting, and of disrupting the logic of the institution from within. But Clifford also points out the fact that there is some unevenness of reciprocity in the processes of contact zones. What he claims is not a “give and take that could lead to a final meeting of minds, a coming together that would erase the discrepancies, the ongoing power imbalances of contact relations.”

I would then say that one of the contradictory aims of education is also to show the contradictions in apparent reciprocities:

---

1 Mediation and Construction of Publics. The MACBA Experience, in: transversal webjournal 04/2004, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0504/ribalta/en>

2 James Clifford, Museums as Contact Zones, in: James Clifford, Routes, Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century, Harvard University Press: Cambridge 1997, S. 212

3 James Clifford, Museums as Contact Zones, in: James Clifford, Routes, Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century, Harvard University Press: Cambridge 1997, S.

Discussions and Community projects became part of a lot of institutional strategies (through which new target groups are organised). But it is important to understand that these debates do not take place in a sphere void of power relations (even if the institution hosts them generously). They don't make any sense as an end in themselves.

The question is not only whether education leaves enough place for contradictions, but if these contradictions can make a difference (in public and institutional discourse).

This can be illustrated with the example of a wall of posters we developed with apprentices in a public space in front of the exhibition *gastarbajteri* [Immigrant labor] – an exhibition on 40 years of working migration to Vienna, at the Wien Museum [Vienna Museum] in 2004.

Together with apprentices we created a public space inside/outside of the museum.

(photo series 2)

Photos: trafo.K

In a workshop the apprentices worked out certain relations in connection with the topics of the exhibition. Starting with discussions about the history of working migration, and by looking at an archive of artistic and activist strategies related to creating a public discourse on political claims the apprentices created, together with artist Andreas Fogarasi, an "autonomous zone" in the public space in front of the Wien Museum. The Reactions to our project varied among the apprentices. Some were very enthusiastic about the topic and about the possibility of hearing about and discussing the history and structures of migration in Austria. A certain process of political consciousness began...

But creating a common space for the un-learning of powerful foregone conclusions was not only successful in the sense we had planned: we realised that some apprentices did not always agree with our position. We tried to discuss this at some points and we silenced it at others. The work in the public space we did together was a result of this process: on one hand it refers to an art discourse in the public space featuring critical reflections on Austrian racism and media; on the other hand it is a testimonial to the simultaneous, successful negotiations with our interlocutors in the group and a failure to arrive at an acceptable "position".

### **3. contra-dictions as talking back**

critical education and parrhesia

In this third part I would like to focus on the contradictions of education in the literal sense of the word contra-diction: oppositional speech, protest or as the cultural theorist bell hooks puts it, "talking back".

bell hooks's concept of "talking back" is about teaching marginalised people and groups, and about speaking from the margins toward and to the centre. People who have existed only as objects of history claim their position as political subjects, as authors of history, against the history that is written about them.

From this point of view critical education can be understood as a way of challenging the canon from within.

One of our trafo.K projects looked to reclaim marginalised histories in the very centre of the cultural capital Linz 2009:

(photo series 3)

“Von einem Kampf zum Anderen” (“From One Struggle to the Next”)

Photo: trafo.K

Rebels! Histories and Herstories by Bus

Three different bus tours – From One Struggle to the Next; Struggle, Embroidery and Roses; and Papers, Work and Terms of Residence – set out in search of the traces of social activism past and present in Linz. When were political demands first taken to the streets of Linz? What did these people want? How did the protesters manifest themselves?

The project worked with a the strategy of reclaiming marginalised histories and herstories in the centre. It used and subverted the classical logic of a tourist city tour by visiting different places and discussing things quite different from what usually happens. And it worked very well: every Bustour was fully booked and very different people took part and engaged in political discussions about working migration, the right to move, feminised and globalised work, neoliberal conditions and the question of how to act in opposition in this situations, how to struggle, to strike back and to fight... The project well succeeded in terms of public and discussion.

But the project decidedly did not answer the tricky question – What is the best way to be part of the program of a cultural capital by being critical – if indeed there is any way to do this... For we were, certainly, well inside an institution. And again, we had to ask ourselves what this means, what effect this has on us, on our positions and our questions.

This leads me to my last unsolved and contradictory question:  
How can we talk back at the institution?

One of Michel Foucault’s concepts that might be of help here is “Parrhesia”, the form of fearless speech he traces back to ancient Greece. Parrhesia is a mode of discourse in which one takes the risk of speaking openly and truthfully, and to that very purpose.

Gerald Raunig talks about the “Double Criticism of Parrhesia” as follows:

“parrhesia means in Greek roughly the activity of a person (the parrhesiastes) "saying everything", freely speaking truth without rhetorical games and without ambiguity, even and especially when this is hazardous. The parrhesiastes speaks the truth, not because he is in possession of the truth, which he makes public in a certain situation, but because he is taking a risk. The clearest indication for the truth of the parrhesia consists in the "fact that a speaker says something dangerous - something other than what the majority believes." [6]

Parrhesia is a ritual, and far from operating only as critique in the negative sense, it is a “public affirmation”. The risky Parrhesia is not pedagogy nor education in the “Duce” sense of the word, because it is not about leading somebody. Foucault explains: Parrhesia is not about convincing, not about instructing. Foucault even speaks about parrhesia as anti-pedagogy.

One contradictory aim of critical or radical education could be this practice of not being silent in moments when there is something to say; and of course in not acting to silence when something is said. **“The Parrhesiastes is exercising dangerous contradiction in a political sense”<sup>4</sup>**

---

4 Gerald Raunig, [http://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/raunig04\\_en.htm#\\_ftnref10](http://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/raunig04_en.htm#_ftnref10)

(photo)

The question *Ist das so? Is it as it is?* is an important question for our educational work. This question is not necessarily parrhesiastic – but it can become parrhesiasric.

One of the trafo.K projects, that we realised together with artist Martin Krenn, has the title “*Ist das so?*”, a project with pupils on the privatisation of school and public space.

(photo series 4)

Photo: Martin Krenn

As a last point I would like to address the idea of challenging the apparatus of value coding from within. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that emancipatory education involves an engagement with educational institutions in the sense of developing strategies of “reversing, displacing and seizing the apparatus of value-coding”<sup>5</sup>. This implies not only the Gramscian idea of “taking over” the apparatus (“becoming state”) in a deconstructive way but also the idea of re-articulating the canonical forms of knowledge. To the extent that this is not only a question of the “how” of education but also of the “what”, it involves by necessity not only the institutional inclusion of the excluded but also the inclusion of popular and subaltern knowledge.

This is political and not a particularly glamorous work. And it is also Spivak who comes out to speak favourably about unglamorous classroom pedagogy:

“In a sense our task is to make people ready to listen, and that is not determined by argument. Indirect and maddeningly slow, forever running the risk of demagogy and coercion mingled with the credulous vanity and class interest of teacher and student it is still only institutionalised education in the human sciences that represents a long-term and collective method for making people want to listen. As far as I can see, remaking (the discipline of history) has its only chance on this unglamorous and often tedious register. Therefore I propose the persistent establishment and reestablishment, the repeated consolidating in undoing, of a strategy of education and classroom pedagogy (...) Such a strategy must speak from within the emancipatory master narratives even while taking a distance from them.”<sup>6</sup>

---

5 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York/London 1993, S. 63

6 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Claims Alterity*, in: Barbara Kruger, Phil Mariani (ed.), *Remaking History*, Dia Art Foundation, *Discussions in Contemporary Culture* Number 4, Bay Press, Washington 1989, S. 200