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Intensifying Theory Production

The School of the Missing Teacher

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> "...intensifying theory production in general, researching, in order to be able to better understand and critically consider society: The aim [of the art strike] was to build up the critical potential within three years, so that artists at the end of the strike would have a different understanding, a different place in society." (Gustav Metzger)

"Intensifying Theory Production": Metzger's Art Strike

In 1974 in London Gustav Metzger, the stateless artist and inventor of auto-destructive art, called for a special kind of strike, a three-year art strike. In the pithy manifesto-like language of the early 1970s, he appealed to his colleagues that for a period of three years – from 1977 to 1980 – they should not produce works, sell works, permit work to go on exhibitions, and refuse collaboration with any part of the "publicity machinery of the art world".[1] Barely twenty-five years later, in an interview with the art historian

Justin Hoffmann, Metzger emphasized the productive side of the strike: not only the cessation of artistic work, the pure negation of art, the destruction of the art system were the aims of the art strike, but rather building up the “critical potential”, creating a different understanding of one’s own practice, as well as a different place of art in society, but most of all and as a precondition for all of this: “intensifying theory production”.[2]

This “intensification” certainly did and does not mean, neither in Metzger’s context of the Art Strike nor in the institutional practice of intensifying theory production that is to be discussed here, a praise of pure contemplation, but rather a condensation, not an invocation to flee from the world, but rather to change the world, not to cease all production, but rather to create worlds.

In knowledge production, the power of invention to create worlds is most likely to be found in self-organized contexts.[3] The present essay, however, starts from an institutional practice, specifically not as the opposite of an instituent practice of self-organization, yet still as one that is clearly distinguished from it. In the relationship of this strange pair, however, there is sometimes a complementarity, more rarely even a complicity between the institutional and the instituent. This complicity between the inside and the outside of an institution goes hand in hand with situative or strategic decisions for overlaps and cooperations, but often enough necessarily also for ruptures and separate paths.

When I focus on my own institutional practice in this essay, then I do so primarily against the background of conceptual endeavors and experiences in our “Vertiefung Theorie”[4], a three-year BA course in the Department of Art and Media at the Zurich Academy of the Arts. The study course team and the students seek to make use of the still existing free space of the art academy in order to

develop and process the currents of aesthetic, political, cultural and media studies theories that are most relevant for the cultural field. New forms of text and theory production are to be created on this basis, but also more generally: of aesthetic and political intervention. Here "intensifying theory production" sometimes also assumes the form that artists move their practice to theory for a period of three years, although not necessarily under the name of an art strike. From a broader perspective, the period of three years is also used by the theory students to invent strategies that break through the dichotomy of theory and practice, as well as that between art production and knowledge production.

Intensifying theory production for three years, that means – similar to Gustav Metzger's genealogy – first reappropriating one's own time. Of course this aspect does not only apply to art production and its refusal; it applies to all the decisions that break with a seemingly compulsory time regime and make room for exploring what is diffuse, unclear, blurred. A three-year "project" of complication instead of the radical reduction of complexity, as it is increasingly expected in the project worlds not only of the cultural field. Along the concrete rupture line of the "Vertiefung Theorie", an intensification of reading, speaking and writing can occur, an un/learning of literacy, a twofold movement of becoming critically informed in contemporary canons and adopting one's own style. The process of simultaneous learning and unlearning literacy implies a knowledge production beyond academic conventions, an endeavor to provoke a movement of deterritorialization with every territorialization of knowledge. If learning literacy here means a method of orientation in the jungle of current discourse formations, then unlearning literacy should cover procedures that turn against the structuring and striating of modes of thinking, speaking and writing.

But intensifying theory production also means engaging with the contexts, the locations and discourses of the formation of theory and art production. “Intensifying” cannot simply mean setting oneself up in a little world and brewing an elite broth between art and theory. It is not enough to cultivate the microcosm of the course of study or the art academy, but there also needs to be a purposeful opening up to other worlds. This, however, should not be in the sense of quickly skimming off the latest concept inventions or critical practices as is so common in the art field: in our specific case, this opening also consists of organizing two long-term event series on aesthetic practice and political theory, which take place in different locations outside the academy.[5]

In cooperations of this kind, it is also possible to probe and make use of the difficult fine line of the complicity between the institutional and the instituent. Of course, this complicity is extremely fragile, especially as far as the – structurally conditioned – tendency towards cooptation and appropriation by the institution is concerned. A self-critical practice will therefore not strive for a de-differentiation, a blurring of the differences between the inside and the outside of the institution, but rather for temporary overlaps, for precarious processes of exchange and differentiation. In both contexts, in the institution of the academy and in self-organized initiatives of knowledge production, cultural work or political work, and all the more in their overlaps, a common problem inevitably arises: the complex relation between teaching and learning, between differently developed specific competences, between different formal or informal hierarchy positions, between forms of empowerment and of fixing power.

“Giving a Stance”: Brecht’s Lehrstück

Bert Brecht treated relations like this and questions of stance in the interstice between teaching and learning altogether in most of his plays, but especially in those that he called "Lehrstücke" ("learning plays") around 1930. At that time of rising fascism in Europe, the subject matter involved developing an anti-fascist theater practice. Yet this theater did not want to stop at conveying political contents, but rather to overturn the hierarchical organizational forms of bourgeois art at the same time. In the tradition of the Russian and German avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s, the Lehrstück was intended to shift the boundary between actors and audience, to become an "exercise for producers". The lesson of the Lehrstück consisted of playing through all the possible positions and roles, enabling a continual change of perspective. In the first text published under the name Lehrstück, the "Badener Lehrstück vom Einverständnis" ("The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent"), there is a clear rejection of the conventional mode of instruction between conveying knowledge and drawing lessons as one of a tilted transfer of contents. For Brecht, the central effect of theater art as well as for (political) education is the production of a stance: "We cannot help you. | Only an instruction | Only a stance | is what we can give you."[6]

But how can "we" "give a stance"?

The question is certainly not a purely technical one and by no means limited to theater; and it is all the more topical, especially since Brecht's experiments did not lead very far, mired not only in political hostility from the outside, but also in internal contradictions. The question of "giving a stance" problematizes the emergence, transfer and transformation of knowledge; it goes to the foundations of knowledge production and thus – even more pointedly and ambivalently in today's setting of cognitive capitalism – substantially also to the foundations of production as a whole.

The emphasis on the concept of production here stands, first of all, for a concrete and clear positioning: we cannot understand our work in the course "Vertiefung Theorie" at all as *Vermittlung*[7], impartation, "media-tion", thus placing ourselves as teachers in the middle between a static form of knowledge as object on the one hand and those to be taught as subjects on the other. In this paradigm, these kinds of student "subjects" would be considered one-sidedly only in the sense of "subordinates" under the impartation as instruction, empty vessels waiting to be filled by instructing "imparters". For its part, knowledge filled up in this way would be treated as a fixed magnitude, immovable, immutable.

In 1984, in his last lectures entitled *La Courage de la Verité*, Michel Foucault distinguished multiple forms of truth discourses (from antiquity)[8], of which three can be seen as figures of *imparting* knowledge: "the prophet", "the wise man", and "the teacher", introduced here in reverse order, present themselves as a strongly male-gendered typology. All three modalities of imparting knowledge center around a specific type, who embodies knowledge and represents the center of a hierarchical relationship of impartation.

First the type of "the teacher" as an expert. This involves a knowledge that is understood as *techne*, as an ability embodied in a practice. In this mode of embodiment knowledge is owned, passed on from one to another as property, from teacher to pupil in a long chain of tradition, in a hierarchy of generations and a uniform, static order of knowledge. In this order a rigid striation and separation of the various techniques and disciplines takes place – in the art academy, for instance, sublated in a clear division and thus emphasis on the classical techniques of visual art. Instead of reinforcing the bond of filiation and severing the bond of the disciplines, following Foucault the point is to develop a rhetorical

practice that seeks conflict and transversal exchange beyond the boundaries of traditions and disciplines.

Secondly, the type of the "wise man": the "wise man" embodies less a technique than a universal knowledge about the being of the world and of the things. His mode of subjectivation consists in fleeing from the world. Since the "wise man" lives withdrawn into himself, his form of imparting can only consist in being a role model, in epitomizing, exemplifying. Yet this form is also a static one, in that the example is understood as being an identitary embodiment, as though it is something constant only copied in other bodies, adapted to other bodies. Universal knowledge and the status of the universal intellectual as a "wise man" correlates with a disregard for every kind of singularity, specificity, situativity. Yet exactly these three components are to be brought to light in contrast to figures of wisdom.

Finally, the type of "the prophet": "the prophet" also has the role of an imparter, but at the same time, he does not speak for himself, in his own name. Between the present and the future he reveals things that elude human beings. In the context of the art academy "the prophet" corresponds with the classic figure of the master. This figure embodies imparting as a medium, as a passageway, as a spiritual center. As enigmatic as the Brechtian message may sound, it is equally impossible to solve the problem of "giving a stance" with a positioning in a prophetic middle between divine truth and the mysterious prophecy of a future fate. Nor is it a matter of speaking in the name of others, representing them or even "helping" them by speaking for them. And nor is it conversely a matter of "assuming a stance", neither in the military sense nor in any other, but rather of moving along a relationship (or multiple posited relationships) without fixing the production of knowledge in a firm center.

“Truth-speaking”: Foucault’s “maître qui manque”

A flexible relationship of this kind does not necessarily have to be imagined as a component of the general praise of governmentality flexibility, but can conversely describe a specific, micropolitical quality of critique. Foucault attempted to distinguish this quality of a critical and flexible relationship in the last years of his life particularly with the Greek concept of *parrhesia* from the history of antiquity. *Parrhesia*, truth-speaking, is the fourth form of truth discourse that goes beyond the types of the teacher, the wise man and the prophet. Foucault largely distinguishes three variations for the concept of parrhesian truth-speaking: the political truth-speaking of the citizen to the majority of the assembly or the philosopher to the tyrant, then ethical truth-speaking as test and exercise leading to care for the self and others, finally the practice of the Cynics as exercising the scandal of the truth, as “philosophical activism” and as a predecessor of the revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20th century.

Even though an actualization of forms of philosophical or intellectual activism may seem substantially more important in times of necessary resistance against neoliberal drilling, at this point I am especially interested in the second, less spectacular variation: ethical truth-speaking, the questioning perfected by Socrates, which leads to self-care. This form of producing knowledge is called ethical, not because it involves the moral integrity of a teacher, wise man or prophet, but rather because an ethical differentiation is at stake as a movement between various positions. These positions (e.g. of teachers and pupils) are not at all the same, but with Foucault one could say they are in the same boat, in the same situation, share certain preconditions despite all differentness.

The focus here is on insinuating a mode of investigation, which leads people to take care of themselves.[9] Socrates is not a teacher in the classic sense, but nor is he a universalist wise man, and nor is he a charismatic master-prophet. His craft consists not of teaching and imparting, but rather in a practice of calling-into-question. The Socratic inquiry leads to self-inquiry. Here knowledge is no longer embodied in a static center, captive, brought to a standstill. Knowledge production lies precisely in the movement from the inquirer to those who are guided by the inquiry to exercise self-care, to give account of the concordance between rational discourse and manner of living.

However, this kind of "care for the self" should only be sought for in the movement of the exchange between inquiry and self-inquiry described above, not in the sense of identitary self-positioning, as self-recognition or recognition of the soul, not in the sense of confession and (self-) purging, whether in its Christian guise or its leftist variation (like that of the Maoist self-criticism). Knowledge arises in the movement, which generates a differentiation, "as difference, as distance, attained contrary to general opinion and shared certainties".[10]

This specific relationship that focuses on testing how life is conducted and the care for oneself corresponds to a "stance" that is no longer embodied in an individual; it is instead a paradoxical *stance in motion*, a moving relation. This kind of relation no longer involves the classic figure of imparting, but rather the movement of the *logos*, speech itself, or as Foucault wonderfully phrased it in passing, a "school of the missing teacher"[11] ("l'école du maître qui manque"). This teacher is "the logos itself, it is the speech that will convey access to truth."[12]

That the teacher is missing, absent, does not mean abandoning every notion of the subject position. It means conceiving subject positions as relations, positing relations and modes of subjectivation. In terms of the real, the missing teacher, Socrates finds himself in the same position as everyone else, he also has to "go to school": "Since the true teacher is not the school teacher, but rather the *logos*, he must listen like the others, and he must care for himself and for others."[13] And yet he still has a privileged position that sets him apart from the others: "He leads the others to this care for oneself and eventually also to the possibility of caring for others."[14] Gustav Metzger's act from 1974 can probably be described, in a sense that goes beyond the classroom, as an exemplary act of *parrhesia*. Metzger's call, the announcement of the art strike, is also an interpellative speech, an interpellation to self-care, in this case of the artists.

If the teacher is missing, absent, then the middle of knowledge production is no longer the static middle of impartation, but rather a rampant middle, in and from which not only "the teacher", but also "the wise man" and "the prophet" together with their dual counter-images, the pupils, adepts and disciples are swept away. It is certainly not the case that the "school of the missing teacher" can simply wash away relationships of dominance and power in the art field and in the university institution, neoliberal modes of governing and self-governing, the problems of privileging and the formation of an elite, the modularization and modulation of knowledge production; however it can negotiate these problems in a new way, surfing on the surfaces of knowledge and at the same time operating in the mode of condensing, deepening, intensifying.

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for shared experiences, and to the Faculty for Radical Aesthetics, the collective desiring machine, which throughout its brief lifespan made stuttering an excellent mode of subjectivation.

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[1] The complete text of Metzger's Manifesto is available from http://www.thing.de/projekte/7:9%23/y_Metzger+s_Art_Strike.html. Except for a few largely outraged reactions immediately following its publication, Gustav Metzger's call remained mostly without consequences. Metzger carried out the three-year strike from 1977 to 1980 by himself.

[2] "Die Erfindung des Art Strike. Gustav Metzger im Interview mit Justin Hoffmann", http://www.ourmotherofpearl.org/retold/articles/hilfe_archive/Hilfe4/art.htm.

[3] Cf.: http://www.edu-factory.org/, http://www.creatingworlds.eipcp.net/, http://radical.temp.si/, http://www.universidadnomada.net/, http://www.chtodelat.org/, et al. Anticipating and going beyond the context of various truth discourses proposed in the following, these forms of self-organized knowledge production could be described as the actualization of the Epicurean truth discourse. Instead of the opposites of teachers and pupils, this presupposes a circle of friends, who trust one another to correct each other. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutik des Subjekts*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 2004, 473-475.

[4] The German word "Vertiefung" means intensification, intensifying, but also – in a technical sense – specialization within a BA course.

[5] Cf. http://www.zhdk.ch/index.php?id=inventionen0 and http://www.zhdk.ch/index.php?id=aesthetik_subversion.

[6] Bertolt Brecht, "Das Badener Lehrstück vom Einverständnis", in: ibid., *Gesammelte Werke 2*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1967, 601: "7. Die Verlesung der Kommentartexte".

[7] The German word *Vermittlung* has a broad range of meanings, which all relate literally and metaphorically to facilitating connections, enabling a conduit, etc., from switch-boards to mediation, intervention, education. [translator's note]

[8] On forms of speaking truth, cf. Foucault, *Der Mut zur Wahrheit*, translated by Jürgen Schröder, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2010, especially 31-48; on the development of the practice of *parrhesia* in antiquity, see also Foucault's Berkeley lectures from 1983, published as *Fearless Speech*, Semiotext(e) (Foreign Agents), 2001. For an actualization of the concept of *parrhesia* in the context of contemporary artistic institutional critique, cf. Gerald Raunig, "The Double Criticism of parrhesia", http://eipcp.net/transversal/0504/raunig/en, and ibid., "Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming", in: Gerald Raunig / Gene Ray (eds.), Art and Contemporary Critical Practice. Reinventing Institutional Critique, London: MayFlyBooks 2009, 3-11.

[9] Foucault (*Der Mut zur Wahrheit*, 112-118) refers here to Socrates' method of testing the Oracle of Delphi, whose statement was that no one is wiser than Socrates. Socrates himself does not understand Apollo's statement, he does not even try to interpret it. Instead he begins an extended investigation, testing the Oracle's statement. Traveling around through the city, he begins questioning the citizens. In a sense, this method deals with a problem that is central not only to this text, but also substantially

for the Operaist practices of the *inchiesta operaia* and the *conricerca* or, more of *militant research* – on this see the *transversal* issue http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406, as well as both parts of the text "Common Notions" by Marta Malo de Molina http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/malo/en and http://eipcp.net/transversal/0707/malo/en.

[10] Frédéric Gros, "Situierung der Vorlesungen", in: Foucault, *Der Mut zur Wahrheit*, 444.

[11] Foucault, Der Mut zur Wahrheit, 203.

[12] Ibid., 202.

[13] Ibid., 202f.

[14] Ibid., 203.