

Boris Buden: 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?