

# Curating and the Educational Turn

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**Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (eds.), *Curating and the Educational Turn*, London / Amsterdam, Open Edition / De Appel, 2010, ISBN 9780949004185, 342 pages**

In the anthology *Curating and the Educational Turn*, editors Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson have compiled a collection of essays, polemic and poetic statements, e-mail correspondence and other sorts of dialogs. The central focus is the role and position of the educational model as a possible turning point in the making of exhibitions. The whole paints a heterogeneous picture of a phenomenon over which consensus has not yet been reached. The strength of this anthology is the diversity of its individual standpoints – but that is also its snag. Doesn't such a highly varied perspective in fact attest to a forced attempt to bring together divergent practices and positions? Are we really experiencing an 'educational turn'? In their introduction, O'Neill and Wilson examine the latter question to legitimize the setup of the book.

A 'curatorialization' of educational models and practices would seem to be emerging, observe the editors. Whereas debates and lectures, symposiums, educational programmes and discursive projects previously fulfilled a secondary role in exhibitions, biennials and, recently, art fairs, now they have taken on a central place in exhibition practice. The list of initiatives based on the educational format is long and diverse: Daniel Buren and Pontus Hultén's Institut des Hautes Études en Arts Plastiques (1996), the 'Platforms' of documenta 11 (2002), Be(com)ing Dutch: Eindhoven Caucus, and unitednationsplaza, to name but a few. The ways in which educational models and strategies are integrated vary; so too, do the manners in which they relate both to institutionalized and formalized (art) academic curriculums, and to a broader (art) field. O'Neill and Wilson see 'the curatorial' as an activity with changing organizational forms and ways of collaboration. In their view, today's curator brings about cultural encounters without necessarily positing an objective beforehand or claiming a demonstrable result afterwards. Curators no longer label themselves authors, but make exchanges possible in which nonlinear processes offer dialogical resistance to the prevailing order. This notion of the curatorial practice is also the book's line of approach.

The majority of the 27 critical contributions were written especially for the book. According to the initiators, four previously published essays have a prominent place in the debate on the educational turn, which is why they have been republished here. Irit Rogoff's 'Turning' clearly sets forth the recurrent doubts regarding the discussion at hand: What makes the postulated 'turn' a turn? To whom is the educational turn in the curatorial practice directed? And, what distinguishes 'turning' – as an active process, a movement, an actual, critical splitting of the components comprising a practice – from the 'branding' of a recognizable style, which subsequently can be effortlessly appropriated? Based on a critical consideration of two projects, Rogoff, after having dispensed with the strongly missionary and edifying educationalist outlook of old, comes up with four propositions to bolster the field of education: let us reorganize education in terms of unlimited potentiality (more is possible than you think) and actualization; the understanding of crucial matters

can become an urgency; education must be accessible; it can be the arena in which challenge is written into our daily activity. In art, she says, education must be employed as a constituent force and as a form of 'self-organization and instituting oneself'.

Not only the practice of the curator, but also that of the artist is characterized by pedagogical methods and instruments, according to Dave Beech. Think of Andrea Fraser's performances, Mark Leckey's lectures or the 'Copenhagen Free University', an institute initiated by artists for critical and marginal forms of knowledge. Or Tony Blair's 1996 phrasing of the three priorities of British New Labour: 'education, education, education'. How, in other words, can the 'educational turn' be understood within the broader context of recent social models? In his essay 'Weberian Lessons: Art, Pedagogy and Managerialism', Beech discusses Duchamp as the artist whose readymades already incorporated the Taylorist concept of social redistribution of labour and shared authorship. This viewpoint might explain the increase in the participation of the public, but it also tends towards a rationalization and 'disenchantment' of society. Beech interprets the introduction of pedagogical models in art as symptoms of our modern bureaucratic society and warns against treating art as standardized cultural capital.

This precarious balance between restrictive educational models and the possibility of development is emphasized in several essays. Andrea Philips reminds us of the way in which Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have indicated knowledge to be immaterial produce; collective intelligence and affective work to be grounds for exploitation. According to her, we must consider what art and design can generate, how they can counterbalance macro political regulations and what they are capable of realizing within an aesthetic practice.

We must engage with the present, say both Marion van Osten (in a discussion with Eva Egermann) and Rogoff. Moreover, we should be sceptical with regard to the educational turn, so as not to shift real questions about the knowledge economy and cognitive capitalism to the art work. For, wonder Stewart Martin and Jane Graham, among others, to what extent can an artist still move freely and autonomously within a practice dominated by educational planning?

Based on his experiences with unitednationsplaza, a nomadic school inspired by the concept for the cancelled Manifesta 6 planned for 2006 in Nicosia, a divided Greek / Turkish town in Cyprus, artist Anton Vidokle suggests that if we are to offer a counterbalance to the prevailing economic political order, perhaps we should combine two models: that of the temporary exhibition open to the public, and that of the potentially innovative and experimental, but closed school. Like Vidokle, Charles Esche, citing historical examples, points out the short life granted to non-hierarchical art academies that are not focused on autonomy and authority or a specialization. He feels that the academic model (What do we learn? How do we learn?) and its implementation should be studied carefully in order to be able to improve it. A 'collective agency' – conspicuously lacking in an art world focused on individual results and objects, particularly in the Netherlands – can function as the basis for a structural revision of academic models. By rejecting measurable results, says Esche, the experimental relation and presentation of the production of knowledge associated with artistic works can be considered anew.

Esche thus recognizes the potential of education. Whereas Simon Sheikh, for instance, takes a reserved position with respect to the institutional rhetorical game we are in danger of becoming caught up in when speaking of an educational turn, Esche sees the posing of questions as an essential educational force that leads us out of an eventual institutional impasse. In that regard, Esche's contribution fits perfectly with Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson's aim of having *Curating and the Educational Turn* function as a Socratic debate in which questions reign supreme and answers do not exist. The criticism that the editors

are out to propagate an implicit viewpoint would thus seem to be parried. The book is arranged as a dynamic and inspiring compilation of perspectives, for which there is (as yet) no unequivocal answer.

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## Tags

Art Discourse

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