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The Pitfalls of Institutional Pedagogy

The Silent University operates at the intersection between contemporary art and modern pedagogy in a space filled with misconceptions about culture and institutionalized art practices. Cultural institutions such as public and private museums, non-profit art institutions, and private art and cultural foundations employ models of education that are radically different in their methods and structures from educational models practiced by institutions with a focus purely on teaching. Specifically, traditional universities are characterized by centralized bureaucratic structures and an expanding administrative apparatus, leading to sprawling costs and the reproduction of class distinctions. At their core, culture and art practices are inherently disposed towards transient projects, while pedagogy on the contrary requires extended commitment.

The Silent University, which was founded in London in 2012, aims to bridge the divide between art and institutionalized pedagogy by suggesting a new structure, not as an alternative, but as a parallel knowledge transfer platform. It is specifically geared toward refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants who are degree holders with a professional background who can no longer gainfully practice their trade due to their status and their exclusion through the political and social system.

Misconceptions about socially engaged art practices appropriating pedagogical methods are visible in the way we speak of these artistic practices. "There is a certain slippage between terms like 'education,' self-organized pedagogies," "research," and "knowledge production,"" as Claire Bishop, in her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, quotes Irit Rogoff. While all these terms have distinct meanings, they are too often used interchangeably. Most importantly, artistic pedagogical practices need to be emancipated from commonly used terminologies such as "projects" and "workshops" referencing them as "tests" or "short-term engagements." On the contrary, pedagogic practices require long-term engagement, commitment, and determination. This faulty characterization is built outward from and perpetuated by the internal administrative and bureaucratic structure of most art institutions. Especially in the field of art, most institutions show a lack of capacity to invest the required long-term commitment, reducing artistic engagement to short-term practices and mere experimentation.

Bishop focuses her analysis on independent artists who are involved with long-term pedagogic efforts. While these are important examples to be aware of in order to gain a better understanding of how alternative systems can develop from self-organized autonomous practices and how they can be sustained long-term, the perspective must be confined to more firmly institutionalized cases in order to better understand the fundamental intersection between art and pedagogy.

Strong education and learning departments are important components of good art institutions. But transforming entire institutions into pedagogic spaces by failing to compartmentalize departments is excessive and in fact does not even replicate typical educational structures. Only when individuals leading such institutions challenge bureaucratic and administrative structures by changing the policies with creative strategies, rather than bringing in artists and cultural practitioners for temporary collaborations, can we arrive at a truly successful pedagogic practice. Concrete results will only arrive when policymakers, artists, cultural practitioners, and institutions all come together in genuine and sustained collaboration. This is the core idea behind the Silent University.

First Error: Bureaucracy

Cultural institutions should learn to adopt characteristics of adhococracy rather than bureaucracy. Decentralization and participatory horizontal models of transferring knowledge must be inevitable priorities. Decision-making and proactive effort must be designed as non-hierarchical processes involving all members of the organization. This will only become possible when individuals leading the institutions hold on to their visionary priorities, even at the risks of challenging the institutional profile.

In his text *The Promise of Deschooling*, Matt Hern describes the scale of school bureaucracy as monstrously wasteful and schooling as a depressing, oppressive, authoritarian, centralized, compulsory and regimented environment—designed to monitor our daily lives and control the way we spend our time. When it comes to pedagogy, art and cultural institutions should not replicate the typical school structure, but instead should follow a new transformative vision.

Cultural institutions need to be aware of the difference between management and engagement when welcoming the public. The true engagement of their publics should be the core priority of every action, leaving room for freedom and flexibility instead of falling victim to strict health, safety, security, insurance, and display restrictions.

Silent University is a challenging institution within different host institutions, which establishes its own adhococratic structure while being fully recognized by the hosting institution.

Second Error: Administration

Pedagogical establishments and large-scale cultural institutions also diverge from each other in their administrative structures. "Schools are huge businesses and they command massive amounts of capital, huge administrative apparatuses, they have enormous workforces and sprawling facilities," writes the Austrian scholar Ivan Illich. He uses a governmental plan known as Title One, which took place between 1965 and 1968, as an example: "Over \$3 billion were spent in U.S. schools to offset the disadvantages of about six million children. It was the most expensive compensatory program to the date ever attempted anywhere in education. In the course of this program no significant improvement was detected in the learning of these 'disadvantaged' children."

This astonishing fact is explained by the diversion of the money to "administrative costs," instead of going directly to pedagogical measures addressing the specific situation and the actual needs of the disadvantaged children. The reality of these expenses is that they painfully limit the projects that an institution can imagine and undertake. Another prominent example of expense concerns carrying the day is the dismissal of globally renowned artist, activist, and educator Joseph Beuys from Düsseldorf's Kunstakademie after his accepting too many students into his course. Beuys did not see the School as a place for certified and registered teachers offering the students a service to gain a certificate, rather he was envisioning a new kind of learning place that could be open to anyone who wanted to engage in an open space of free exchange, shared interest, and mutual non-hierarchical experience based learning. Cultural institutions inherently share the advantage to be able to address, engage, and integrate a wide range of public and therefore hold the capacity to turn themselves into learning centers that invite everyone to freely meet and exchange knowledge.

Third Error: Class Distinction

Pedagogical establishments also differ from cultural institutions in the establishments' endemic perpetuation of class divisions. The enormous levels of debt shouldered by participants in the mainstream education system constitute, in the words of Franco Berardi Bifo, "a form of slavery." Bifo also writes that, "the indebtedness is the new condition of submission." It is ironic when, as a petition on MoveOn states, the interest on federal subsidized Stafford student loans is set to increase this summer, Wall Street banks are granted inappropriately low rates. Meanwhile, Strike Debt, a collective student movement organization, paved the way for alternative debt bailout strategies such as Rolling Jubilee—a network of debtors who liberate each other through mutual aid. They buy distressed debt from financial firms, often for pennies on the dollar, and then cancel it so that borrowers do not have to repay.

In this context, Cultural Institutions should promote strategies that offer equal learning opportunities to everyone regardless of class distinctions.

The Silent University: Value in Place of Service

Given the pronounced differences between pedagogy and cultural institutional practice, where does an organization like the Silent University fall? The Silent University defines itself as "an autonomous knowledge exchange platform by and for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants" who hold professional backgrounds but cannot gainfully practice their trade due to the limitations of their political and social status. By inventing alternative currencies in place of money or free voluntary service, the Silent University creates a process of exchanging knowledge and experience that is mutually beneficial to everyone involved in order to allow democratic access to education beyond social hierarchies and class distinctions. Initiated at Tate and Delfina Foundation, London, in 2012, the Silent University has already reached out beyond the UK. Currently, Tensta Konsthall is hosting the Silent University in Stockholm and collaborations in Paris, New York, and Berlin are in planning. In its operations in London and Stockholm, the Silent University relies on the collaboration with local art institutions, community, and education centers, as it uses the existing facilities and networks of these various institutions. With these community contacts, the Silent University activates the all too often unrecognized knowledge of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants that have been condemned to silence in their new countries of residence. Instead of awaiting the accreditation and legitimization through the established institutional structures, the Silent University concentrates on direct measures and immediate action, defying the deleterious aspects of the modern educational system in an act of genuine social liberation.