

Johanna Lewengard (Konstfack, Stockholm): 'Education is never a neutral process, I believe we need to establish this. Education either functions as an instrument used to integrate new generations into the logic of the present system, or education becomes the means by which students are allowed to deal critically with (their) reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of (their) future. This is a question about whether we believe in education as a practice of integration or if we believe in education as a practice of liberation. But no matter what we believe in as educators, we all should at least be transparent about our approaches. Every student should have the right to know what kind of learning processes they will enter. What is most critical with higher education today, is not that the vast majority of universities in Europe operate according to processes of integration, but that we believe this is a neutral activity.'

01 Lewengard, Johanna. *Design Dedication: Adaptive Mentalities In Design Education*. Ed. Annelys de Vet. Amsterdam: Valiz with the Sandberg Instituut, 2020.

II

PROMISED GOODS

Glorify What Exists

Despite all corruptions the inherent goodness of education is believed incorruptible. This conviction will not be abandoned however much education is debased, reduced to the status of commodity, or instrument for 'getting ahead'. Despite everything that degrades education, supplying endless source material for its critics, the romance of an educational good lives on. Even those claiming to have seen it all, those who have become cynically detached and will no longer be disappointed, fall under its spell. Through tears of pain or with eyes dried blank, educators remain enamoured. They 'glorify what exists' for fear of its dissolution.¹

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In today's educational circles, those holding to the remnants of twentieth century progressivism believe the worst kind of educator asserts himself as a purveyor of expertise. To privilege one's expertise, with the implication that the educator's primary mission is to transmit this knowledge to the student who must listen attentively, is viewed as if it were a perfect demagoguery to be driven out of the classroom by all means. Our last surviving progressives rail against such expressed authority as symptomatic of a lack of openness to the knowledge of others. Such educators are at their purest when beginning each lesson with the utterance: 'I am here to facilitate your learning, I will learn from you as you learn'. The alternative and opposite introduction: 'Here is what you must know', is only expressed under duress when teaching to the test. Meanwhile educators and commentators of a reactionary persuasion rage against

this 'progressive orthodoxy' that somehow, they claim, remains alive and well despite the devastatingly effective work of their predecessors to bring it to its knees. Denouncing that spectre, they assert the virtue of the teacher's classroom sovereignty and the value of a lesson that begins: 'Now I will tell you what is worth knowing'. As familiar as it is tiresome, this endless dispute over whether or not the teacher is a tyrant to exercise authority in the classroom, endless debate considering the justifiable limits and scope of teacherly influence, operates as if a non-tyrannical teacher could, with compassion, strip education of its barbarities. Here manifests a conceit common to all parties, a shared belief that education could be rescued from the effects of power, either by removing or by justifying the presence of the overbearing teacher; as if this would allow the essential 'goodness' of the teacher-educator to be realised at last before us. This shared conceit took modern form as it became attached to the idea that any single individual, suitably trained, might achieve the kind of reasonable and dependable neutrality expected of today's educator. Few today could still defend this position in good faith. We late moderns are most of us far too cynical for that. Yet we remain attached to its echo, out of weakness and for want of alternative.

Our Nihilism

Western educators cry out, suffering the effects of their 'European nihilism'.² There is something consumptive, in the tubercular sense, about today's educator. Riven by a disease which becomes manifest in the wasting away of high ideals, the educator hides blood-filled sputum in a rag. Once waved aloft, now filled with detritus. In it we find denial, the pursuit of distraction, and over-attachment to defeated ideals. Three lines of catarrh. These remnants constitute education today.

Embrace your nihilism with tears and laughter for ‘the biggest laughs are based on the biggest disappointments’.³ The hardest laugh and also the most difficult, is for those still insisting on their optimism.⁴ As the ‘destiny of two millennia of Western history’ nihilism is our unavoidable affliction.⁵ Those educators claiming to exist beyond its reach merely deny its presence. Those hoping to alter its destiny make only noise. There is no quick and easy escape. We are trapped in the digestive tract of Western history. Our challenge, perhaps our only option, is to contrive an ‘accomplished nihilism’.⁶ Here is no wish to supersede modernity, or supersede education. Accomplished nihilism admits its predecessors as its facts of existence. It decides to interrogate rather than ignore its past, realising it remains haunted. The nihilist can only hope to ‘dissolve modernity [and dissolve education] through a radicalization of its own constitutive tendencies’.⁷ Hence Zarathustra’s commandment: ‘What falleth, that shall one also push!’⁸ The accomplished nihilist desires only to force one out.

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We follow education downwards giving its ‘worst’ aspects their due. And once we have stared into the educational abyss, having chased education to the bottom of its despair. After our Cynicism has taken us into the darkness that education prepared. As we face the stench of its defeated ideals and aborted lives, we must attempt, indeed learn to breathe in its ruins.

Scenes of In- struction, Scenes of In- surrection

A Fiery Flying Roule is a sequence of 25 pamphlets that first circulated in the environs of the Oakland Commune (a.k.a. Occupy Oakland) in late 2011 and early 2012.

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I think I read the D.H. Lawrence poem about the mosquito and Sean Bonney's prescient "Letter on Riots and Doubt" (written a few months earlier on 5 August 2011, the day before riots kicked off in London following the police murder of Mark Duggan). In that missive Bonney "wonder[s] about the possibility of a poetry that only the enemy can understand." This seemed salient to me in that moment. Who was the enemy? What is poetry? What is understanding? These questions continue to plague me.

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From an email sent mid-November 2011 (two weeks or so after the Roules first emerged) to some friends in the Midwest:

When I hand these pamphlets out at these mass gatherings — and 1000s of copies are in circulation now — I say to people "here's some poetry" or "here's a poem about a mosquito" or "here's some literature." More often than not people reach out for them without me having to thrust them into their hands. If someone is reluctant (which also happens, especially on Sproul Plaza at Berkeley, where there's a lot of leafleting going on), my line is: "just a little poetry, nothing to worry about, it makes nothing happen."

But I mean that Auden quote in a serious way: poetry makes nothing happen, which is to say, it actually conjures the vacuums we're faced with: makes them visible in ways we otherwise might not see, and/but also gives us permission to fill those vacuums too with rare new grammars of belonging.

- 03 Steinhoff, Eric. "Scenes of Instruction, Scenes of Insurrection." *Counter Signals* 2 (November 2017).

Currently, the students I encounter seem far more uncertain about the project of self-actualization than my peers and I were twenty years ago. They feel that there are no clear ethical guidelines shaping actions. Yet, while they despair, they are also adamant that education should be liberatory. They want and demand more from professors than my generation did. There are times when I walk into classrooms overflowing with students who feel terribly wounded in their psyches (many of them see therapists), yet I do not think that they want therapy from me. They do want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They do want knowledge that is meaningful. They rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences.

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The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.

The search for alternatives in education must therefore start with an agreement on what it is we mean by "school."

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The Myth of Institutionalized Values

School initiates, too, the Myth of Unending Consumption. This modern myth is grounded in the belief that process inevitably produces something of value and, therefore, production necessarily produces demand. School teaches us that instruction produces learning. The existence of schools produces the demand for schooling. Once we have learned to need school, all our activities tend to take the shape of client relationships to other specialized institutions. Once the self-taught man or woman has been discredited, all nonprofessional activity is rendered suspect. In school we are taught that valuable learning is the result of attendance; that the value of learning increases with the amount of input; and, finally, that this value can be measured and documented by grades and certificates.

In fact, learning is the human activity which least needs manipulation by others. Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting. Most people learn best by being "with it," yet school makes them identify their personal, cognitive growth with elaborate planning and manipulation.

Once a man or woman has accepted the need for school, he or she is easy prey for other institutions. Once young people have allowed their imaginations to be formed by curricular instruction, they are conditioned to institutional planning of every sort. "Instruction" smothers the horizon of their imaginations. They cannot be betrayed, but only short-changed, because they have been taught to substitute expectations for hope. They will no longer be surprised, for good or ill, by other people, because they have been taught what to expect from every other person who has been taught as they were. This is true in the case of another person or in the case of a machine.

This transfer of responsibility from self to institution guarantees social regression, especially once it has been accepted as an obligation. So rebels against Alma Mater often "make it" into her faculty instead of growing into the courage to infect others with their personal teaching and to assume responsibility for the results. This suggests the possibility of a new Oedipus story—Oedipus the Teacher, who "makes" his mother in order to engender children with her. The man addicted to being taught seeks his security in compulsive teaching. The woman who experiences her knowledge as the result of a process wants to reproduce it in others.

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General Characteristics of New Formal Educational Institutions

A good educational system should have three purposes: it should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and, finally, furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known. Such a system would require the application of constitutional guarantees to education. Learners should not be forced to submit to an obligatory curriculum, or to discrimination based on whether they possess a certificate or a diploma. Nor should the public be forced to support, through a regressive taxation, a huge professional apparatus of educators and buildings which in fact restricts the public's chances for learning to the services the profession is willing to put on the market. It should use modern technology to make free speech, free assembly, and a free press truly universal and, therefore, fully educational.

Schools are designed on the assumption that there is a secret to everything in life; that the quality of life depends on knowing that secret; that secrets can be known only in orderly successions; and that only teachers can properly reveal these secrets. An individual with a schooled mind conceives of the world as a pyramid of classified packages accessible only to those who carry the proper tags. New educational institutions would break apart this pyramid. Their purpose must be to facilitate access for the learner: to allow him to look into the windows of the control room or the parliament, if he cannot get in by the door. Moreover, such new institutions should be channels to which the learner would have access without credentials or pedigree—public spaces in which peers and elders outside his immediate horizon would become available.

Offsetting Participation in the Institution

1. Make all curricula, readings, assignments, and as much documentation as possible (critique, seminar, etc.) freely and publicly available.
2. Make guest lecturers, etc. public events. (Make all class meetings public, or observable, events?)
3. Set aside portions of teaching income for:
 - Student materials (no additional cost to taking the class).
 - Scholarships?
 - Funding to teach the same material independently.
 - Donations to community + non-institutional education programs.
4. Provide a forum for learning about and critiquing the pedagogical system.
5. Listen to (and solicit) student needs and desires for their education —commit to and publish evaluations.

Yet the very notion of school has become, in neoliberal terms, a concept for just another commercial product, forced to compete along with everything and everyone else for a place in the market. At least this has made it clear, in taking up arms in the consumer warfare of our age, that the convincing 'school-ness' of a school is disingenuously more important than anything it might offer as a place or space of open curiosity about the world.

Fortunately it is in the nature of learning that any overly-determined or, in our case, market-driven definition of what makes a school a school will always be challenged or countered by alternative approaches. Though I still find myself thinking, gloomily, that the best option would be not to go to school at all – to give up the pedagogical ghost of an immoral economy just as one would abandon a contaminated or broken building.

I know that is not enough of an answer either. So I thought I would talk here about how a school could learn instead to shed some of its 'school-ness'. Not necessarily by opening up the roof, or punching a few holes into the walls – even if interacting with the physical framework is one way to reveal the building itself as something less confined – but I mean to take school down from the inside, by learning from the 'world-ness' of its occupants and their areas of interest.

Here for example we have the school, and there, a bit further on, is the outside world, sealed off as if everything exists as a competing or separate entity. But why so separate? Isn't a school just a building with a school in it, as vulnerable, or as open to interpretive use (or destruction) as any other?