Tusovkian Meetings: New Approaches to Art Education and Museum Programming

INTRO SLIDE / PINKY The emergence of the modern educational system in the Western world was characterised by public institutions aimed at regulating the movements of both individuals and the collective social body in order to produce well-disciplined, coherent subjects on a mass scale. If we go back for a moment and take a look at vocational education, it is defined as a post-secondary, multi-year program in a career or apprenticeship that results in acquired skill or trade. In 1668, trade schools were established by the roman Catholic Church in Quebec City and St. Joachim where cabinet making, carpentry, masonry, roofing, shoemaking, tailoring, sculpture and painting were taught as trades and as arts. Throughout the eighteenth century, trade schools spread through Quebec as a connection was established between schooling in practical subjects on the one hand, and careers and problems in society on the other. OCA As of 1867, the provincial governments took administrative responsibility for education, but the federal government did provide funding for vocational schools, including the Ontario Society of Artists' School in 1876 (later OCADU). OCA STUDENTS Fast forward to 1960 when the federal government passed the Technical Educational Act to share up to 50% provincial expenditures for technical education, this in response to the population increase of the post-war period and the changing labour market. This resulted in an explosion of students in technical subjects and a drop in those in academic programs.

NEW OCADU John Beck and Matthew Cornford mourn the loss of the vocational school in "***The Art School in Ruins***", saying that until as recently as 1984, most small towns in Britain had an art school, whereas today only a handful of dedicated schools exist. The art school, alas, was absorbed into polytechnics and universities when institutions intended to provide artisanal

training became autonomously regulated spaces where culture is produced and disseminated. Although Beck and Cornford acknowledge that art and design education has *not* disappeared, their point is that the art school stimulated the cultural imaginary in ways that university departments rarely do, and by this they mean that the most productive aspect of the art school is *not* educational, but rather environmental and affective—it is the site of creative possibility and social mobility. The art school experience of nineteen 1960s and 70s Britain—in their case—was committed to a working practice, to a mode of learning that assumed a lifestyle, a set of values and practices that stand as an alternative model of social and cultural identity. Such venues combined training in vocational trades with exposure to developments in contemporary fine art—they were the portal through which advanced cultural debates and practices could be encountered. But even by the mid eighties in Britain, the process of art school amalgamation and closure had been under way for over twenty years: in fact, way back in 1957 the Ministry proposed to replace qualification with a non-centralised three-year programme more responsive to the needs of industry. By 1960, emphasis of training had shifted away from traditional skills to requirements of liberal arts undergraduate education, which implied the introduction of a compulsory academic element to a new *diploma* in art and design, with an art history provision. In 1974, however, the diploma was scrapped in favour of a *BA* that was integrated into the national system of higher qualifications. The result was, the authors say, disappointing uniformity where everyone becomes bundled into a unified system where they are subjected to the same kind of generalising academic and professional pressures.

To this end, people like Jon Thompson doubt that fine art is a subject of study or even a ***discipline*** as it does not have normative rules of procedure but rather "is a loose assemblage of first-order materially based activities taking place in speculative existential territory that has no

boundaries" (218). Therefore, it cannot be translated using the vocabulary of scholarly research used by universities to determine standards. In place of the art school, Beck and Cornford state that the signature gallery or museum has now become the temporary custodian of "luxury goods" (65) and now provides the presence of art and culture within a community. It is the gallery or museum that now offers access to the global art market and provides reassurance that the local past is worthy of display. Meanwhile, the art school is in ruins due to its failure to embed art and design training in ***socially relevant contexts***.

The disciplinary institutions have organised education as a process of subjectivation (people subjected) that re-affirms the existing order and distribution of power. But art by nature presupposes a close relationship with history, religion, philosophy, anthropology, sociology and a myriad of other disciplines that include the visual within their own disciplinary parameters. MITCHELL For the past 30 years or so, we have witnessed a trend of universities launching visual or cultural studies programs, in which many disciplines are gathered under what is now known as *interdisciplinarity*, a kind of safe zone allowing unusual and un-locatable practises the opportunity of finding a respectable home. In an attempt to retain their transgressive nature, W. J. T. Mitchell mentions that, for him, it is not so much interdisciplinarity that interests him, but rather the notion of ***indiscipline***, which he describes as the moment "of turbulence or incoherence at the inner and outer boundaries of disciplines. If a discipline is a way of insuring the continuity of a set of collective practices … 'indiscipline' is a moment of breakage or rupture, when the continuity is broken and the practice comes into question … that moment before the routine or ritual is reasserted, the moment of chaos or wonder when a discipline, a way of doing things, compulsively performs a revelation of its own inadequacy. … I think of it as the 'anarchist' moment …" (541). This 'moment of chaos or wonder' that Mitchell anxiously

awaits is what excites me about working with students and the public at large. Over the more than ten years I have taught art at the post-secondary level and the four that I have curated public programs in a museum environment, my artistic practice, teaching tactics and programming ideas have experienced a transformation.

BAKHTIN Mikhail Bakhtin, uses the word *carnival* to refer to similar notions of disruption, but his context is one of a generation earlier and of communist Russia. He posits 'turning the world upside down' as the way to critical potential necessary for the dominated to respond to the dominating, and says that ***laughter*** is the vehicle for this. Thus, for him, laughter has no place in the East; it belongs to the West, for it is the language of subversion, satire and parody, all of which are used by capitalist society to question, challenge or undermine official discourse.

POSTER Bakhtin's Russian heritage led me to the Russian concept of tusovka, which refers to the artistic and intellectual community of the 1960s and 70s, forced underground to avoid persecution from the Communist Party. The Russian *tusovaniye* means to shuffle, *tusovka* refers to the artistic and intellectual community and ***tusovchiks*** are its participants. Although tusovka literally means to shuffle, today it is used as slang for hanging out. PERFORMANCE The Café Saigon in Leningrad (1964 to December 1991) is one of the best-known tusovka cafés where intellectuals were able to create conceptual art and share Western writings that were not authorised by official culture and were, as such, illegal. They were places where otherwise banned European books would be translated night after night: pages would be written by hand in Russian and passed around to the tusovchiks, or a reader would translate live. Elena Zdravomyslova calls this the "informal-public sphere" (143): such cafes (in plural, tusovki) were symbolic locales for people (the urban intelligentsia) whose everyday practices were identified as representing an alternative to those accepted by officially-sanctioned public life. These were

communicative meetings that included drinking sessions, informal and absurdist humour and the arranging of events and performances—a meeting at the café was regarded as the starting point for a night of conviviality. In late 1991, the Café Saigon had closed down and had been converted into a store selling toilets made in Italy, a symbol of the drastic social change taking place.

You may be wondering what all of this has to do with my work as an artist, art instructor and public programmer. My fifth-year studio classes soon morphed into tusovkian meetings, and the class I gave to the MAs in art history was entitled "Tusovkian Meetings: Indisciplined Excercises for Non-Artists", and my practice has long been installation based, ARTWORK creating environments for people to do things like weave shoelaces through enormous wooden puzzles, ARTWORK stamp rubber stamps or walk through spirals ARTWORK. And now in a museum environment, I try to create these encounters for/with the public. ESMERALDA I see it as an extension of indiscipline and carnivalism, in which my intention as artist, teacher and programmer is precisely to inspire chaos and wonder as a way of crossing boundaries and breaking the barriers of disciplines. I try, as best I can, to treat my practice, classes and public programming as tusovkian meetings, thereby referencing artistic activities of the 90s in Russia: their gatherings lacked identifiable structure and hierarchies for its participants; rather, whoever showed up at the meeting that week, be they artist or not, was accepted as a tusovchik irregardless of his or her background or artistic proposals.

BOOK At both BFA and MA levels, I taught the notion of tusovka through **Paul Thek's Teaching Notes**, recently reproduced by Harrell Fletcher for an event at the Whitney around the Thek retrospective in 2010. Thek generated his notes for a 4-D Sculpture class at Cooper Union that he taught between 1978 and 1981. In 2007, Fletcher's studio class at Cooper Union

reenacted the content of Thek's original class, based on the notes. I had done the same at both BFA and MA levels between 2004 and 2007. What is attractive about Thek's approach to art through questions and exercises, is that it instigates a process of self-discovery, interrogation and dialogue with others, namely one's students—he exhorts the students to treat the classroom not as a space for theories, but instead as part of their everyday reality.

BOOK The long, provocative and now famous list of questions and marching orders has been passed around by art teachers for decades, and most recently has also been reprinted in ***Draw it with your eyes closed: the art of the art assignment***. An informal investigation into the ambiguous task of teaching art in the wake of postmodernism, the editors of this new little book asked dozens of artists and teachers—some well known and some not—to speak about the best art assignments they've given or received or even heard of. Although a lot of "flatulent academic writing clouds the air" (Garner) here, the question of whether art can be taught prevails: should an art education remain loose and resist codification, or mimic the rigor of disciplinary academia? The book suggests a model that collapses the boundaries between art school and the world, demanding a heightened engagement in negotiating each one—dissatisfied with the theoretical focus of current discussions of art education, the editors plumb the everyday depths of the classroom experience, holding the ***instructor's authority*** disdainfully. LAB The title, *Draw It With Your Eyes Closed*, references art professor Hoyt L. Sherman's book entitled *Drawing by Seeing*, as well as his ***flash lab*** of 1940s Ohio State University, where he taught drawing and composition through the development of visual memory: in the darkened lab, images were momentarily flashed on a screen and students drew them from memory, in pitch blackness, the aim being broad-based visual acuity. Sherman was a forerunner of current thinking in computer art, electronic music and the nature of telematic culture. We'll come back to technology shortly.

TIRAVANIJA Nicolas Bourriaud states that art today demands a ***conversation***. In fact, "the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real … [The artist] is a *tenant of culture*, to borrow Michel de Certeau's expression" (Relational 13). Bouriaud's writing on ***relational aesthetics*** is quite exciting as he proposes art as human interaction, a veritable de-throning of the work of art and subordination of the artist as genius. The death of the author, as Roland Barthes called it. Bourriaud attributes this to the birth of a worldwide urban culture that has resulted in the urbanisation of the artistic project in general. The gallery or museum space that was meant to be walked through has thus been transformed into a "period of time meant to be lived through" (Bourriaud page), a place where being-together is a central concern for the elaboration of a collective meaning. Art, for Bourriaud, is a state of encounter. This 'culture of use' is an attempt to make socially relevant art outside the constraints of the market, to critique the power of the State by emphasising the power of the crowd that participates and completes the artwork.

RODRIGUEZ Steven H. Madoff, however, proposes another category of art that offers a different way to define artistic work in relation to social praxis: ***service aesthetics***. The practitioners of this art are not drawn to collective experience, but rather the task of offering transactional sites that fill the landscape of the service economy: doctor's offices, clinics, hair salons and shops. The priority for these artists is to render an actual service in order to counter the uniformity of experience by looking inside its bureaucracy, its commercially charged insincerity and indifference. Service aesthetics affirms a sense of self for the individual client and offers a restorative space opened up in the institutional recontextualisation of the service enterprise, and point to art's ability to transform the world by dissolving the distinction between the artist and any other worker. As a curator of public programs at a museum, you can imagine

that both relational and service aesthetics are of interest to me, as both deal with involving people in some way.

PUJOL Ernesto Pujol agrees that art has a socially critical role in the evolution of the democratic experiment, currently weakened worldwide—that art schools must consider their institutional role in the support of democracy. However, how can this be 'taught' at art school? Pujol believes most foundation programs—based on modernist notions—are outdated. How many here have taught foundation studios based on the Bauhaus structure, reciting Wucius Wong, Donis Dondis, Johannes Itten, et al? WONG/DONDIS/ITTEN I did it for nine years and continue to see the value in it, but Pujol calls for "training in the basic tools of Conceptualism, such as scholarly research and literary writing, as applied to traditional painting, sculpture, printmaking, glass, ceramics, and photographic processes, making … gestures more conscious and articulate and balancing draft with thought, while also gazing selectively at other disciplines" (4). His requirement that students write thoughtful proposals before, during and after making an artwork does not mean simply to defend the artwork during critiques, but to learn how to justify the creation intellectually, beyond the visually dense world. PROPOSITIONS He wants Conceptualism to go beyond its now rigid academic classicism, to its new position 1. as a production methodology that can be applied to the most traditional of mediums, and 2. as new hybrid forms that combine elements from many mediums and disciplines. Art students need access to training in other disciplines, and this, he says, should be regarded as the beginning of a lifelong intellectual journey: "this is about generating public intellectuals, visual scholars, and *artist citizens*: active cultural workers who participate in global society" (Pujol 6), and "art schools should be the conscience of the art world" (9). For him, the art school should educate young artists about shop and business ethics; counsel on early success and the risks of branding;

teach how to address art dealers, collectors and curators; and host more experimental and political art that otherwise can't find exhibition venues.

It's important to note that although Pujol maintains that conceptually-based ***multidisciplinary*** training turns art classes into reading-and-writing classes, it *also* demands more comprehensive courses in craft and technique. He advocates for eliminating the separation between art history, art theory and studio courses, saying the "conceptually based, multidisciplinary studios are hybrid learning environments" (6), which means that either instructors have to have access to both studios and wired classrooms, or they must co-teach.

He even goes so far as to suggest that students *volunteer*—I see you rolling your eyes!—a reference to Carol Becker's (current dean of Columbia University's School of the Arts) feeling that because the issue of the audience is not raised enough, that it is usually assumed that the work is being made for a gallery context. At the National School for Painting, Sculpture and Printmaking, students had to complete 480 hours of volunteer hours, a far cry from an 'optional' internship at the Visual Arts Department at Western University, which requires 100. Pujol feels that educators need to guide students to help viewers through their work's complexity, and to do so he advocates for having community-based pedagogical experiences integrated into the curriculum so that long-term partnerships can be established with communities *whose leaders are willing to participate in the education of artists*. Thus the emphasis is now on problem solving through culture, rather than on the purity of mediums. As a public programmer, I see this difficulty arise on a daily basis with artists who have little experience with the public.

ILLICH Here I cannot help but be reminded of the brilliant yet polemical ideas of Ivan Illich: he advocated deinstitutionalisation in favour of more ***convivial forms*** of education where celebration, open-endedness and egalitarianism were paramount for ***lifelong learning***. He vied

for "engendering a lifestyle which will enable us to be spontaneous, independent, yet related to each other" (57), and to this end his life was dedicated to showing how institutionalised education has come to obscure and undermine the value of everyday or vernacular forms. He critiques the process of institutionalisation, experts and expertise, commodification and counterproductivity—in short, the messianic principle that schools and institutions can educate. His answer was action over consumption, a convivial alternative where modern *technologies* serve politically interrelated individuals rather than managers. To do so, he conceived of four Education or Learning Webs: reference services in libraries, rental agencies, laboratories, showrooms, factories, airports and farms, available to apprentices or during off-hours; a skill exchange in which people list their skills and the conditions they are willing to serve as models for others, along with their address at which to reach them; a peer-matching communications network that permits people to describe a learning activity in which they wish to engage with the hopes of finding a partner; and reference services to educators at large in the form of a directory with addresses and self-descriptions of professionals and freelancers so educators can be chosen by consulting former clients. Keep in mind that he was writing this in the seventies, and all of the Learning Webs are actually in existence today, thanks to the internet. In Pujol's poignant essay for *Art School: Propositions for the 21ˢᵗ Century*, he states that the "future of art education will be based on the notion of universal immediate access" (3): middle-class students enter art school connected to apparatuses that generate instant information, communication and currency to goods, and several include image capture. And yet, he laments, many of the old curriculum structures make change extremely slow.

EKSTITUTION Florian Schneider also concurs with Illich that the emergence of ***digital technologies*** trigger the process of deinstitutionalisation and deregulation. In fact, he proposes a

term that parallels the earlier concept of *tusovka*: the ***ekstitution*** defined as networked environments, deinstitutionalised and deregulated spaces such as informal networks, free universities, open academies, squatted universities, night schools, or proto-academies. Indeed in both eastern and western Europe of the 1980s, "learning could suddenly take place anywhere: in the streets, in bars or clubs, in self-organized seminars, in the office spaces of so-called social movements, in soccer stadiums, through subcultural fanzines, in squatted houses or even science shops" (Schneider). Whereas in the in-stitution there is an inequality between those who know and those who don't, the ekstitution manifests indifference towards inequalities since it doesn't matter who possesses knowledge; rather, there is instant access to knowledge. Indeed ekstitutions exist today, outside the institutional framework and instead of progress, they are based on temporality.

MUSEUM And speaking of conviviality and technology, Nina Simon has taken the museum world by storm with her concept of the ***participatory museum***. Before becoming the director/curator of the Santa Cruz Museum, she was an exhibit designer and museum consultant who published a book called *The Participatory Museum* BOOK and writes an active blog called Museum 2.0: BLOG both are dedicated to working with community members and visitors to make cultural institutions more dynamic, relevant and essential places. She dissects the process of participatory change, showing how to make choices that will augment a museum's programs or mission, and she says they can do this by inviting people to actively engage as cultural participants, not passive consumers. Again, she points to technology: it has ushered in a set of tools and design patterns that make participation more accessible than ever, so that visitors now expect the ability to discuss, share and remix what they consume. Her book is thus based on three fundamental theories: the idea of the audience-centred institution that is as accessible as a

shopping mall or train station; the idea that visitors construct their own meaning from cultural experiences; and the idea that users' voices can inform and invigorate both project design and public-facing programs.

ACADEMY In fact, her blog post of October 3 really excited me as I was writing this paper: the headline reads "Khan Academy and the Revolution in Online Free Choice Learning". This Academy is a free, non-profit online source for educational instructional multilingual videos, which have reached almost 200 million viewers since launching in 2006. Their mission is no short order: "world-class education, for anyone, anywhere". In the last year, Salman Khan has added new 'faculty', notably Drs. Beth Harris and Steven Zucker, both formerly of the Museum of Modern Art, who are known for their *Smarthistory* website and podcasts (Beth Harris was Director of Digital Learning at the MoMA). SMARTHISTORY With the Khan Academy, both affirmed that we are finally leaving behind the eighteenth century model of education where groups of students are expected to learn at a standard pace. These instructors connect you with knowledge and inspiration in more creative ways—the way the best museums do. We often talk about museums as leaders in providing substantive, essential alternatives to formal schooling, but museums are rarely seen as pursuing this promise in innovative ways like the Khan Academy— both confirm that museums are not the easiest ships to turn, and that working for a start-up has allowed them to produce ninety videos in four months. They ascertain that "the principles of digital publishing—which is iterative, personal, prolific, and collaborative—could unleash museums as active centers of learning and engagement … while [museums] support scholars with deep expertise, they produce relatively little content for public consumption on the web. The focus remains the high status, expensive and little-read exhibition catalogue, instead of

developing web-based content that will draw more visitors" (Hart in Simon Khan Academy). GOOGLE ART PROJECT Needless to say, they are avid supports of the Google Art Project.

All of this parallels trends in the museum environment. BOOK Lois Silverman's new book *The Social Work of Museums*, for example, speaks about how museums affect people's lives, their relationships and society at large. Museums are under financial and social pressure to justify their existence and relevance in today's society, and Silverman's research indicated that with their unique resources, museums have a powerful role to play as agents of social service. She believes there is a lot of transformative work to be done in this area. In concordance with Madoff and Pujol, she vies for profoundly democratic museums, a way of seeing them as welcoming places that are instruments of social transformation, rather than shrines of elitism.

In conclusion, what I find so exciting about all of this is that it allows for tusovkian meetings to take place in private galleries, school rooms and museum institutions; it promotes their growth and fosters the ideas and artwork resulting from moments of indiscipline. As an artist, arts educator and public programmer, I do indeed hope for carnival and laughter that might inspire that moment of chaos and wonder in both students and the public at large.

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