

THE HERESY OF DIDACTIC ART

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Note: This double issue of ARTMargins consists of two sections. First comes a special issue, edited by Sven Spieker and Tom Holert (“The Heresy of Didactic Art”), followed by a section where we offer four new research articles on topics aligned with other editorial priorities (pp. 126–225).

In the special issue, we are interested in the multiple, and often strategic, connections between art and alternative, radical pedagogies. Of course, the confluence of art and radical pedagogy is nothing particularly new. The past twenty years, especially, have witnessed a resurgence of all manner of debates and initiatives that attend to the role that contemporary art plays or could play in the development of critical education and pedagogy. Below the radar of academic art history, varying cross sections between artists’ movements and pedagogy have combined Black, feminist, LGBTQ+, or disability activism, as well as workers’ or anarchists’ struggles and organizing to shape art practices that do not shy away from teaching or from a relational epistemology of truth. Especially pertinent in this regard has been the enlistment of art in various forms of militant education as a means to oppose the hegemonic (visual) pedagogy of colonialism.

The notion of an “educational turn,” referring both to increased awareness of the educational functions of art and to various cultural institutions beyond art education proper—with its blossoming occurring

around 2010—is often used to describe this conjuncture between radical-ness and pedagogy, and the term continues to hold considerable discursive sway over the art world today.¹ Indeed, the idea of an “educational turn”—only the latest, it should be noted, in a series of such turns over the long 20th century—has become an umbrella for many intersections of art and pedagogy, up to a point where the two concepts appear, today, to be virtually synonymous. Indeed, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that the history and epistemological structure of contemporary art has now entered what can be referred to as the “posteducational” stage.

Of particular importance for the posteducational ubiquity of the pedagogical in contemporary art are the struggles, contradictions, and dead ends that result from the current, often uneasy, coexistence of aesthetic production, institutional reform, the neoliberal financialization and marketization of education, the surge in machine learning, and the overall “educationalization” of society. Today more than ever, the radical pedagogies and countereducational institutions designed by artists all over the world confront the escalating educationalization of society at large, a development that characterizes the neoliberal regimes of the present as little else can. Predicated on constant assessment and evaluation, testing and ranking, the neoliberal governmentality has placed the economies and politics, the *political economy* of education, center stage. The logic of “human capital” renders the subject in terms of “employability,” and thus dependent on the training and education purchased in one of the various niches and layers of the financialized education markets. As Susannah E. Haslam has noted, there is “a problem manifest through contemporary art’s co-option of educational forms and educational initiatives; its interrogation of (alternative) sites of knowledge production; and its matrix of artistic work and theoretical discourse defined by the Educational Turn, as it has become inscribed into art’s history and theory.”² It is thus advisable to refrain from any undifferentiated embrace of the educational turn’s alleged blessings.

The education in contemporary fine arts, clearly, is one of those niches and layers mentioned above, and a highly differentiated one at that. What does it mean to be a “learner” in the arts? It can surely imply

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- 1 See, e.g., Irit Rogoff, “Turning,” *e-flux Journal*, no. 0 (November 2008), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/00/68470/turning/>, and *Curating and the Educational Turn*, ed. Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson (Amsterdam: Open Editions/de Appel, 2010).
 - 2 Susannah E. Haslam, *After the Educational Turn—Alternatives to the Alternative Art School*, PhD thesis, Royal College of Art, London, 2018, 16.

many things, from costly, high-end MFA studies at a prestigious art school to self-organized grassroots education at an alternative academy founded by artists. The proliferation, in the field of contemporary art, of different modes of institutionalization—from *basic* to *beta*, from *alternative* to *para*—has resulted in the emergence of a wide spectrum of art educations, ranging from formal or academic schooling to more informal models. This proliferation pertains not only to the training of future artists and cultural workers but also to museums, galleries, biennials, festivals, fairs, auction houses, and independent art spaces. And while some of these initiatives and venues seem to respond to the very same neoliberal imperatives they profess to critique, others offer tools for negotiating, if not for transcending or fully abandoning, those imperatives. Indeed, the enthusiastic rediscovery of texts from the 1960s' tradition of alternative and radical pedagogy—including Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, or Augusto Boal—and the burgeoning embrace of feminist, decolonial, disability, antifascist, and abolitionist education have no doubt contributed to this development. While, on the institutional level, art museums face, and sometimes give in to, the ever-increasing pressure to generate revenue, many among them still make an earnest effort to recalibrate their offerings in sometimes daring, adventurous ways. In the process, the educational department, neglected and even denigrated for decades, has begun, hesitantly at times, to move to a central position within the museum hierarchy.

The ongoing educationalist overhaul is—directly and indirectly—*informed* by the educational and pedagogical practices of artists and art institutions alike. With regard to the latter, it is worth noting that the (post)educational turn of the past twenty years is affecting the institutional framework for art production as well as its exhibiting, activities that are in their turn increasingly being framed as essentially educational endeavors. To be sure, the museum's retooling as an institution devoted to radical pedagogy dates at least from the 1920s, when the Soviet Productivists sought to revolutionize the art museum under the banner of collective art production and education for (and by) the masses. However, as the conversation between Annette Krauss and Ferdi Thajib in this special issue also demonstrates, today the progressive nature of the museum can no longer be taken for granted. As a result, oftentimes, education *by* the institution and education *for* the institution—educating the museum—have to be combined in order to effect tangible change with regard to accessibility, intercultural opening, and audience develop-

ment. In this context, artists as much as policy makers may function as educators and pedagogues vis-à-vis the museum and its overhaul. For example, as Pujan Karambeigi shows in his contribution, the effort to dismantle the idea of the visitor as a universal subject by expanding the number of sensorial channels through which the museum disseminates its offerings—thus facilitating access to the institution by an extremely diverse range of patrons with any number of physical or mental characteristics—is complemented by artists using a variety of strategies to transcend the idea of a normative recipient for their work—strategies that, in their turn, provide vital feedback for the museum’s educational efforts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given the museum’s educational aspirations even greater urgency. Within a few months, the virtual exhibition and the Zoom talk, as much as online seminars and conferences, have profoundly reshaped our encounters with art and the discussions of it, with important consequences for issues such as access justice or the educationalist overhaul of the art institution. What Naomi Klein has referred to as “the screen new deal”³ has unquestionably reached the art world, and if we do not learn how to survive amid the algorithmic rule of social media and machine learning, our posteducational condition might well turn out to be a disaster.

The impetus behind our special issue is ultimately historical, or rather, genealogical. While we are interested in the way in which the posteducation condition affects art institutions and art production, we also want to ask after the more specific forms under which art and education have asserted themselves in art production since the 1960s. There is perhaps no single term that encapsulates this conundrum quite as palpably as the *didactic*, an often vilified term that reentered progressive art criticism in the 1960s, when the New York-based critic Barbara Rose published an article by the same title in the pages of *Artforum*, a publication that had until then viewed didactic art as synonymous with “pedantic” or “academic.”⁴ For Rose, by contrast, “didactic” denoted less a dogmatic lesson than a work of art whose truth was to be found in the conversations or discussions it set off. In Rose’s wake, Jack Burnham’s use of the phrase, again in *Artforum*, spoke to his concern that the erosion of the boundaries between art and other domains—sci-

3 Naomi Klein, “Screen New Deal: Under Cover of Mass Death, Andrew Cuomo Calls On the Billionaires to Build a High-Tech Dystopia,” *The Intercept* (May 8, 2020), <https://theintercept.com/2020/05/08/andrew-cuomo-eric-schmidt-coronavirus-tech-shock-doctrine/>.

4 Barbara Rose, “The Value of Didactic Art,” *Artforum* (April 1967): 33–36.

ence, research, the natural environment, social life—necessitated a new critical approach based on research and production, along with a new type of art as a form of organization and information handling. As Burnham wrote, “the specific function of modern didactic art has been to show that art does not reside in material entities, but in relations between people and between people and the components of their environment.”⁵ In Burnham’s view, the artist—whose activities can increasingly, according to the author, not be distinguished from other types of social production—acts as an organizer of society’s productive forces, using information to model the relations between people and environments.

Rose’s and Burnham’s enlisting of the didactic, with different intentions, contends with the widespread disdain in which didactic art is still held today, despite the fact that in the premodern and early modern eras, art’s didactic functions were all but a commonplace. During the European Middle Ages, Horace’s well-known formula “*aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae*” (“the poets either want to instruct or to please”) was, in the words of Norbert Kössinger and Claudia Wittig, a “universal phenomenon” in literature and the arts.⁶ However, this dominance ended with the Romantic era, coinciding with the demand that art exist for its own sake, and culminating in Edgar Allan Poe’s famous denunciation of the heteronomy of art as a form of heresy: “a heresy too palpably false to be long tolerated, but one which, in the brief period it has already endured, may be said to have accomplished more in the corruption of our Poetical Literature than all its other enemies combined. I allude to the heresies of The Didactic.”⁷

Ever since Poe’s time, didactic art, which contradicts the autonomous art object that is at the center of the modernist project, has been associated with an unseemly overload of heteronomous elements that are considered a distraction from art’s presumed essence. As Luis Camnitzer has noted, “didactics is generally considered a dirty word. . . . It is the primacy of formalism and the promotion of art for art’s sake that led to a very simplistic definition of didactics and to its blacklisting. In formalism’s dismissive definition of ‘didacticism,’ explicit messages are viewed as *dumbed down*.”⁸

5 Jack Burnham, “System Esthetics,” *Artforum* (September 1968): 30–35, 31, emphasis original.

6 Norbert Kössinger and Claudia Wittig.

7 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Poetic Principle,” . . .

8 Luis Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 34.

By contrast, as Judith Rodenbeck shows here, in an article about West German artist Marianne Wex's extensive photographic research project *Let's Take Back Our Space!* (1977), the didactic was an extraordinarily productive, if usually unacknowledged and certainly undertheorized, category in postformalist art of the late 1960s and 70s. As Rodenbeck argues, Wex's massive demonstration of gendered postures, both in the form of a book and as part of an exhibition, enlists didacticism in a collective feminist emancipation project that analyzes the somatic self as a social construction, prompting in the process the very corporeal awareness it analyzes.

The affective qualities of the didactic, an ambition to transcend normative ways of knowing and feeling as part of instruction and demonstration, are also in evidence in Hungarian neo-avant-garde artist Miklós Erdély's exhibition *Hidden Green* (1975), which was part of the artist's effort to install montage as a form of knowledge production. As Sándor Hornyik notes in his commentary on Eszter Bartholy's interpretation of *Hidden Green*—of which we present the first English translation—in his work, Erdély connected theories of creativity, including art, with everyday practice and scientific knowledge, a strategy that culminated in his 1975 "Creativity Exercises" workshop, where the artist used elements of happenings and actionism in an effort to reshape artistic creativity through, among other things, elements of reform pedagogy.⁹ As Timothy Ridlen argues in his review article for this issue,¹⁰ reform pedagogy is regaining its currency in our age of globalized neoliberal capitalism and monetized education, through, among other things, its emphasis on individual educational needs, preempting in this way insights about the situatedness of learning that have often informed artistic projects engaged with education and pedagogy.

Both Wex and Erdély urge a flexible—we might even say, a downright haptic—approach to didacticism that stresses the concept's Greek roots: *didaktikos* names first and foremost a teacher's ability to convey the truth, as well as the ability to connect with an audience effectively.

9 For further details, see Sándor Hornyik, "Creativity, Collaboration, and Enlightenment: Miklós Erdély's 'Art Pedagogy,'" in Dóra Hegyi, Zsuzsa László, and Franciska Zólyom, eds., *Creativity Exercises: Emancipatory Pedagogies in Art and Beyond* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020), 183–203.

10 Reviewing Hegyi, László, and Zólyom, *Creativity Exercises*, as well as *Back to the Sandbox: Art and Radical Pedagogy* (Bellingham, WA: Western Gallery, Western Washington University, 2019).

As Dora García's artist project demonstrates, at times, this audience is ourselves. For García, studying, reading, and excerpting are (auto)didactic ways of working through neoliberalism and its unceasing metabolization of knowledge. Her notebooks are part of the very same "haptic" approach to the didactic—an effort to demonstrate ideas—that also animates Wex and Erdély.

Our goal with this special issue is not to endorse, promote, or celebrate didactic art over its alleged (autonomous) other. Indeed, we are mindful of the historic, and thus frequently contradictory and dissonant, underpinnings of any didacticism, and we acknowledge the many ways in which discourses of learning and education have been and are being instrumentalized, not least by a variety of neoliberal and neo-nationalist discourses and politics. Yet, as didacticism is being called upon to fight a suspicious metaphysics of art and to turn art into an efficient vehicle for political messages and ideological battle—how does didactic art play out formally and aesthetically amid such struggles? At times, education and didactics are pitted against each other, with the former referring to a notion of personal becoming, and the latter to pernicious forms of indoctrination. A genealogy of these terms and their semantics may be helpful in arriving at a more differentiated picture of the art/didactics conundrum. It may also help answer the question of the extent to which didactics, this "bad object," has been transvalued in late-20th-century art.