

Irit Rogoff
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We have recently heard much about the “educational turn in curating” among several other “educational turns” affecting cultural practices around us.¹ Having participated in several of the projects emerging from this perceived “turn,” it seems pertinent to ask whether this umbrella is actually descriptive of the drives that have propelled this desired transition.²

My questions here firstly concern what constitutes a “turn” to begin with? Are we talking about a “reading strategy” or an interpretative model, as was the understanding of the “linguistic turn” in the 1970s, with its intimations of an underlying structure that could be read across numerous cultural practices and utterances? Are we talking about reading one system – a pedagogical one – across another system – one of display, exhibition, and manifestation – so that they nudge one another in ways that might open them up to other ways of being? Or, are we talking instead about an active movement – a generative moment in which a new horizon emerges in the process – leaving behind the practice that was its originating point?

Secondly, it seems pertinent to ask to what extent the hardening of a “turn” into a series of generic or stylistic tropes can be seen as capable of resolving the urgencies that underwrote it in the first place? In other words, does an “educational turn in curating” address education or curating at precisely the points at which it urgently needs to be shaken up and made uncomfortable?



John Palmesino and Anselm Franke, *Think Tank*, 2006. Image: Van Abbemuseum.

Delving into these questions is made more difficult by the degree of slippage that currently takes place between notions of “knowledge production,” “research,” “education,” “open-ended production,” and “self-organized pedagogies,” when all these approaches seem to have converged into a set of parameters for some

renewed facet of production.³ Although quite different in their genesis, methodology, and protocols, it appears that some perceived proximity to “knowledge economies” has rendered all of these terms part and parcel of a certain liberalizing shift within the world of contemporary art practices.

Concerned that these initiatives are in danger of being cut off from their original impetus and threaten to harden into a recognizable “style,” I would like to invoke, towards the end of this discussion, Foucault’s notion of “parrhesia” – free, blatant public speech – as perhaps a better model through which to understand some kind of “educational turn” in art.

Education

It might be easiest to enter the fray of education via what were for me the two projects which best reflected my own engagement with “education” within the arenas of display and of gathering.

The first of these was the *Academy* project (2006) at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven.⁴ Part of a series of exhibitions, projects, and events that took place between a number of institutions, this installment in the Netherlands was a collaboration between 22 participants and

the staff of the museum. The project as a whole posed the question, “What can we learn from the museum?” and referred to a form of learning that could take place beyond that which the museum sets out to show or teach.

Our initial question concerned whether an idea of an “academy” (as a moment of learning within the safe space of an academic institution) was a metaphor for a moment of speculation, expansion, and reflexivity without the constant demand for proven results. If this was a space of experimentation and exploration, then how might we extract these vital principles and apply them to the rest of our lives? How might we also perhaps apply them to our institutions? Born of a belief that the institutions we inhabit can potentially be so much more than they are, these questions ask how the museum, the university, the art school, can surpass their current functions.

Of course, we touched on this problematic at the very moment a heated debate regarding the Bologna Accord – the European so-called reform of education – was erupting all around us. Instead of hanging our heads and lamenting the awfulness of these reforms, with their emphasis on quantifiable and comparable outcomes, we thought it might be productive to see if this

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Susan Kelly, Janna Graham, Valeria Graziano, *The Ambulator*, 2006. Image: Van Abbemuseum.



Edgar Schmitz and Liam Gillick, *Inverted Research Tool*, 2006. Image: Van Abbemuseum.

unexpected politicization of the discussion around education might be an opportunity to see how the principles we cherish in the education process might be applied across a broader range of institutional activities. This could be a way of saying to the politicians: “You want to politicize education? Let’s really politicize education. Let’s make it a principle of actualization that really does touch the institutions of culture – not by producing perfectly trained, efficient, and informed workers for the cultural sector, but by thinking of the cultural sector as a market economy, and bringing the principles of education there to operate as forms of actualization.”

When we say that these institutions of ours could be so much more than they are, we don’t imply that they should be larger, or more efficient, or more progressive, or more fun (though they certainly should be more fun). Instead, we wish to say that their reach could be wider, that they might provide sites for doing so much more than they ever thought they could.

In asking what we can learn from the museum beyond what it sets out to teach us, we were not focused on the museum’s expertise, what it owns and how it displays it, conserves it, historicizes it. Our interests were in the possibilities for the museum to open a place for people to engage ideas differently – ideas from outside its own walls. So the museum in our thinking was the site of possibility, the site of potentiality.

Academy wanted to stimulate reflections on this potentiality within society. It situated itself in the speculative tension between the question of what one needs to know and that of what one aspires to. Academies often focus on what it is that people need to know in order to start thinking and acting, but we chose to approach the academy as a space that generates vital principles and activities – activities and principles you can take with you and which can be applied beyond its walls to become a mode of life-long learning. As such, *Academy* aimed to develop a counterpoint to the professionalization, technocratization, and privatization of academies that result from the Bologna reforms and to the monitoring and outcome-based culture that characterize higher education in Europe today.

In considering what we might have at our disposal to counter such official assessments of how learning can be evaluated and appreciated, we focused on two terms: *potentiality* and *actualization*.

By “potentiality” we meant a possibility to act that is not limited to an ability. Since acting can never be understood as being enabled simply by a set of skills or opportunities, it must be

dependent on a will and a drive. More importantly, it must always include within it an element of fallibility – the possibility that acting will end in failure. The other term we wanted to mobilize in conjunction with “academy” was that of “actualization,” which implies that certain meanings and possibilities embedded within objects, situations, actors, and spaces carry a potential to be “liberated,” as it were. This points to a condition in which we all function in a complex system of embeddedness – one in which social processes, bodies of learning, individual subjectivities cannot be separated and distinguished from one another.

Both these terms seem important for mobilizing any re-evaluation of education, as they allow us to expand the spaces and activities that house such processes. Similarly, they allow us to think of “learning” as taking place in situations or sites that don’t necessarily intend or prescribe such activity.

At Van Abbe, we envisaged an exhibition project that brought together five teams of different cultural practitioners who had access to every aspect of the museum’s collection, staff, and activities. Each of these teams pursued a line of inquiry into what we could learn from the museum beyond the objects on display and its educational practices.

The access that was given was not aimed at producing institutional critique or exposing the true realities of the institution. Instead, it aimed at eliciting the unseen and unmarked possibilities that already exist within these spaces – the people who are already working there and who bring together unexpected life experiences and connections, the visitors whose interactions with the place are not gauged, the collection which could be read in a variety of ways far beyond splendid examples of key art-historical moments, the paths outward which extend beyond the museum, the spaces and navigational vectors which are unexpectedly plotted within it.

There were many questions circulating in our spaces in the exhibition, with each room and each group producing their own questions in relation to the central one: “What can we learn from the museum?”

There were questions regarding who produces questioning: What are legitimate questions, and under what conditions are they produced? The seminar class, the think tank, the government department, the statistician’s bureau are sites for the production of questions, but we were suggesting others born of fleeting, arbitrary conversations between strangers, of convivial loitering and of unexpected lines of flight in and out of the museum as in the *Ambulator* project (Susan Kelly, Janna Graham,

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Valeria Graziano).

There were questions regarding the relations between expertise and hope and expertise and governance, knowledge that is used to bolster hopeful fantasies and knowledge that is used to impose dominant concerns, such as in the *Think Tank* project (John Palmesino and Anselm Franke).

There were questions regarding what kind of modes of attention are paid in a context such as a museum or a library. What could these modes of attention be liberated for? Could they be made use of in some other ways? Could they become an instrument of liberation, as in the *Inverted Research Tool* (Edgar Schmitz and Liam Gillick)?

There were questions regarding the very nature of ownership of an image or an idea. How does a simple object come to stand in for an entire complex network of knowing, legitimating, conserving, and “anointing with cultural status” (all of which operate under the aegis of ownership)? *Imaginary Property* (Florian Schneider and Multitude e.V.) asked, “What does it mean to own an image?”

There were questions regarding cultural difference that asked whether a museum really is an institution of representation, meant to represent those outside its systems and

privileged audiences. If it is not, then maybe those “outsiders” are not outside at all, but can be recognized as already here and part of us, but only if we listen – really listen to ourselves, as in *Sounding Difference* (Irit Rogoff, Deepa Naik).

And there were other questions about the museum’s knowledge vs. our own knowledge, and about open forums for learning at the edges of that which is acknowledged, as in *I Like That* (Rob Stone and Jean-Paul Martinon).

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Summit

That initial project within the spaces and parameters set by the museum led several of us to think about taking those questions into a less regulated and prescribed space, one in which institutional practices could encounter self-organized, activist initiatives. This led to *SUMMIT Non-Aligned Initiatives in Education Culture* (www.summit.kein.org), a forum which took place in Berlin in May 2007.⁵

In a sense, we came together in the name of “weak education,” a discourse on education that is non-reactive, and does not seek to engage in everything that we know fully well to be wrong with education – its constant commoditization, its over-bureaucratization, its ever-increasing emphasis on predictable outcomes, etc. If



Florian Schneider and Multitude e.V., *Imaginary Property*, 2006. Image: Van Abbemuseum.

education is forever reacting to the woes of the world, we hoped to posit that education is in and of the world – not a response to crisis, but part of its ongoing complexity, not reacting to realities, but producing them. Often these practices end up being low-key, uncategorizable, non-heroic, and certainly not uplifting, but nevertheless immensely creative.

Why education and why at that particular moment?

This focus on education provided a way to counter the eternal lament of how bad things are – how bureaucratized, how homogenized, how understaffed and underfunded, how awful the demands of the Bologna Accord are with its homogenizing drives, how sad the loss of local traditions is, etc. Though not without its justifications, this voice of endless complaint serves to box education into the confines of a small community of students and education professionals. How, then, to paraphrase Roger Buegel, can education become more? How can it be more than the site of shrinkage and disappointment?

And why at this particular moment? Because, with Bologna and all its discontents, this moment is also seeing an unprecedented number of self-organized forums emerging

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outside institutions, as well as self-empowered departures inside institutions. Propelled from within rather than boxed in from outside, education here becomes the site of a coming-together of the odd and unexpected – shared curiosities, shared subjectivities, shared sufferings, and shared passions congregate around the promise of a subject, an insight, a creative possibility. Education is by definition processual – involving a low-key transformative process, it embodies duration and the development of a contested common ground.

Here was perhaps one of the most important leaps from *Academy* to *Summit* – an understanding of “education” as a platform that could signal a politics, a platform that could bring together unexpected and momentary conjunctions of academics, art world citizens, union organizers, activists, and many others in such a way that they could see themselves and their activities reflected within the broadly defined field of “education.”

At its best, education forms collectivities – many fleeting collectivities that ebb and flow, converge and fall apart. These are small ontological communities propelled by desire and curiosity, cemented together by the kind of empowerment that comes from intellectual



Rob Stone and Jean-Paul Martinon, *I Like That*, 2006. Image: Van Abbemuseum.

challenge. The whole point in coming together out of curiosity is to not have to come together out of identity: we the readers of J. L. Nancy encounter we the migrant or we the culturally displaced or we the sexually dissenting – all of these being one and the same we. So at this moment in which we are so preoccupied with how to participate and how to take part in the limited space that remains open, education signals rich possibilities of coming together and participating in an arena not yet signaled.

Having liberated myself from the arena of strong, redemptive, missionary education, I would like to furnish the field with the following terms:

Notions of **potentiality** and **actualization** offer a capacity to replace the reorganization of education with ideas concerning distribution and dissemination. This speaks to an idea that there might be endless possibilities within us that we might never be able to bring to successful fruition. “Academy” becomes the site of this duality, of an understanding of “I can” as always, already yoked to an eternal “I can’t.” If this duality is not paralyzing, which I do not think it is, then it has possibilities for an understanding of what it is about an “academy” that can actually become a model for “being in the world.”

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Perhaps there is an excitement in shifting our perception of a place of education or training to one which is not pure preparation, pure resolution. “Academy” might instead encompass fallibility, which can be understood as a form of knowledge production rather than one of disappointment.

Equally, I would suggest education to be the site of a shift away from a culture of **emergency** to one of **urgency**. Emergency is always reactive to a set of state imperatives that produce an endless chain of crises, mostly of our own making. So many of us have taken part in miserable panels about “the crisis in education.” A notion of urgency presents the possibility of producing an understanding of what the crucial issues are, so that they may become driving forces. The morning after George W. Bush was re-elected president, my classroom moved swiftly from amazement to a discussion about why electoral forums were not the arena of political participation, and what they might actually represent instead – a move from an emergency to an urgency.

Perhaps most importantly, I want to think about education not through the endless demands that are foisted on both culture and education to be **accessible**, to provide a simple



Irit Rogoff, Deepa Naik, *Sounding Difference*, 2006. Image: Van Abbemuseum.

entry point to complex ideas. The Tate Modern comes to mind as an example of how a museum can function as an entertainment machine that celebrates “critique lite.” Instead, I want to think of education in terms of the places to which we have **access**. I understand this access as the ability to formulate one’s own questions, as opposed to simply answering those that are posed to you in the name of an open and participatory democratic process. After all, it is very clear that those who formulate the questions produce the playing field.

Finally, I would like to think of education as the arena in which **challenge** is written into our daily activity, where we learn and perform critically informed challenges that don’t aim at undermining or overtaking. When political parties, courts of law, or any other authority challenges a position, it is done with the aim of delegitimizing with a better one, of establishing absolute rights and wrongs. In education, when we challenge an idea, we suggest that there is room for imagining another way of thinking. By doing so in a way that does not overcome the original idea, we don’t expend energy forming opposition, but reserve it for imagining alternatives. At a conference I attended, Jaad Isaac, a Palestinian geographer, produced transportation maps of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank that had an almost mind-blowing clarity to them. It made me think of what gargantuan energies had to be put into turning the evil chaos of that occupation into the crystalline clarity of those maps – energies that were needed in order to invent Palestine. In their pristine clarity, the maps performed a challenge to the expenditure of energies as a response to an awful situation. If education can release our energies from what needs to be opposed to what can be imagined, or at least perform some kind of negotiation of that, then perhaps we have an education that is more.

Turn

Quite a long time ago, when I had just finished my Ph.D. and was embarking on a postdoc and a radical change of path towards critical theory, I ran across my very first Art History professor on the street. This was unexpected – my being in a different country and city with the promise of another life on the horizon were not conducive at that moment to knowing how to deal elegantly with that which I had left behind. Having asked me what I was up to, he listened patiently as I prattled away, full of all the new ideas and possibilities that had just opened up to me. My professor was a kind, humane, and generous scholar of the old school. He may have been somewhat patrician, but he had an intuitive grasp of changes shaping the world around him.

At the end of my excited recitative he looked at me and said, “I do not agree with what you are doing and I certainly don’t agree with how you are going about it, but I am very proud of you for doing this.” It is hard now to imagine my confusion at hearing this, yet I realize with hindsight that he was recognizing a “turn” in the making, rather than expressing concern or hostility for what it was rejecting or espousing. Clearly this man, who had been a genuinely great teacher of things I could no longer be excited by, saw learning as a series of turns.

In a “turn,” we shift *away* from something or *towards* or *around* something, and it is *we* who are in movement, rather than *it*. Something is activated in us, perhaps even actualized, as we move. And so I am tempted to turn away from the various emulations of an aesthetics of pedagogy that have taken place in so many forums and platforms around us in recent years, and towards the very drive to *turn*.

So my question here is twofold, concerning on the one hand the capacity for artistic and curatorial practices to capture the dynamics of a turn, and on the other, the kind of drive being released in the process.

In the first instance, this might require that we break somewhat with an equating logic that claims that process-based work and open-ended experimentation creates the speculation, unpredictability, self-organization, and criticality that characterize the understanding of education within the art world. Many of us have worked with this understanding quite consistently, and while some of its premises have been quite productive for much of our work, it nevertheless lends itself far too easily to emulating the institutions of art education, with its archives, libraries, and research-based practices as primary representational strategies. On the one hand, moving these principles into sites of contemporary art display signaled a shift away from the structures of objects and markets and dominant aesthetics towards an insistence on the unchartable, processual nature of any creative enterprise. Yet on the other hand, it has led all too easily into the emergence of a mode of “pedagogical aesthetics” in which a table in the middle of the room, a set of empty bookshelves, a growing archive of assembled bits and pieces, a classroom or lecture scenario, or the promise of a conversation have taken away the burden to rethink and dislodge daily those dominant burdens ourselves.⁶ Having myself generated several of these modes, I am not sure that I want to completely dispense with them, because the drive that they made manifest – to force these spaces to be more active, more questioning, less insular, and more challenging – is one to which I would like to stay faithful. In particular, I would

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not wish to give up the notion of “conversation,” which to my mind has been the most significant shift within the art world over the past decade.

In the wake of Documenta X and Documenta XI, it became clear that one of the most significant contributions that the art world had made to the culture at large has been the emergence of a conversational mode hosted by it.⁷ In part, this has had to do with the fact that there already exists a certain amount of infrastructure within the art world, where there are available spaces, small budgets, existing publicity machines, recognizable formats such as exhibitions, gatherings, lecture series, interviews, as well as a constant interested audience made up of art students, cultural activists, etc.⁸ As a result, a new set of conversations between artists, scientists, philosophers, critics, economists, architects, planners, and so on, came into being and engaged the issues of the day through a set of highly attenuated prisms. By not being subject to the twin authorities of governing institutions or authoritative academic knowledge, these conversations could in effect be opened up to a speculative mode, and to the invention of subjects as they emerged and were recognized.

And so the art world became the site of extensive talking – talking emerged as a practice, as a mode of gathering, as a way of getting access to some knowledge and to some questions, as networking and organizing and articulating some necessary questions. But did we put any value on what was actually being said? Or, did we privilege the coming-together of people in space and trust that formats and substances would emerge from these?

Increasingly, it seems to me that the “turn” we are talking about must result not only in new formats, but also in another way of recognizing when and why something important is being said.

Foucault, in a lecture he once gave at Berkeley, embarked upon a discussion of the word “parrhesia,” a common term in Greco-Roman culture.⁹ He stated that it is generally perceived as free speech, and that those who practice it are perceived to be those who speak the truth. The active components of parrhesia, according to Foucault, are frankness (“to say everything”), truth (“to tell the truth because he knows it is true”), danger (“only if there is a risk of danger in his telling the truth”), criticism (“not to demonstrate the truth to someone else, but as the function of criticism”) and duty (“telling the truth is regarded as a duty”). In parrhesia, Foucault tells us, we have “a verbal activity in which the speaker expresses his personal relation to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or

help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.”¹⁰

It is hard to imagine a more romantic or idealistic agenda for invoking “turns” in the educational field. And yet, I am drawn to these with less embarrassment than you might think one would have as a self-conscious critical theorist working within the field of contemporary art. Perhaps because nowhere in this analysis are we told *which truth*, or *to what ends* it is being deployed. Truth, it would seem, is not a position, but a drive.

To add an even more active dimension to Foucault’s discussion of parrhesia, we can also establish that in Aramaic the term is invoked in relation to such speech when it is stated “openly, blatantly, in public.” So this truth, which is in no one’s particular interest or to any particular end, must be spoken in public, must have an audience, and must take the form of an address.

Foucault called this “fearless speech,” and at the end of his lecture series he says, “I would say that the problematization of truth has two sides, two major aspects.... One side is concerned with ensuring that the process of reasoning is correct in ensuring if a statement is true. And the other side is concerned with the question: what is the importance for the individual and for the society of telling the truth, of knowing the truth, of having people who tell the truth, as well as knowing how to recognize them?”¹¹

Increasingly, I think “education” and the “educational turn” might be just that: the moment when we attend to the production and articulation of truths – not truth as correct, as provable, as fact, but truth as that which collects around it subjectivities that are neither gathered nor reflected by other utterances. Stating truths in relation to the great arguments, issues, and great institutions of the day is relatively easy, for these dictate the terms by which such truths are both arrived at and articulated. Telling truths in the marginal and barely-formed spaces in which the curious gather – this is another project altogether: one’s personal relation to truth.

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1
"Salon Discussion: 'You Talkin' to me? Why art is turning to education,'" The Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.
<http://www.ica.org.uk/Salon%20Discussion:%20'You%20Talkin'%20to%20me%3F%20Why%20art%20is%20turning%20to%20education'+17098.twl>

2
Among others; A.C.A.D.E.M.Y Hamburg, Antwerp, Eindhoven, 2006-7, "Summit – Non Aligned Initiatives in Education Culture," 2007, "Faculties of Architecture, Dutch Pavillion, Venice Architecture Biennale", 2008. The Ph.D. program "Curatorial/Knowledge" at Goldsmiths College, London University, co-directed with Jean-Paul Martinon.

3
Mårten Spångberg, "Researching Research, Some reflections on the current status of research in performing arts," International Festival.
<http://www.international-festival.org/node/28529>

4
Initiated by Angelika Nollert, then at the Siemens Art Fund, A.C.A.D.E.M.Y was a collective project between Hamburger Kunstverein, MuKHA Antwerp, Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, and the Department of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths, London University. It took place in three cities throughout 2006 and was accompanied by a book published by Revolver - Archiv für aktuelle Kunst and edited by A. Nollert and I. Rogoff et al.
http://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/browse/?tx_vabdisplay_pi1%5Bp-type%5D=18&tx_vabdisplay_pi1%5Bproject%5D=157&cHash=7d70173357

5
The project was organized by a collective – Irit Rogoff (London), Florian Schneider (Munich), Nora Sternfeld (Vienna), Susanne Lang (Berlin), Nicolas Siepen (Berlin), Kodwo Eshun (London) – and in collaboration with the HAU theatres, Unitednationsplaza, BootLab, and the Bundeskulturstiftung, all in Berlin.

6
I say all this with a certain awkwardness, in light of my own involvement with so many of these initiatives. Exhibitions, self-organized forums within the art world, numerous conversation platforms: all shared the belief that turning to "education" as an operating model would allow us to re-invigorate the spaces of display as sites of genuine transformation.

7
I refer to the discussion forum "100 days – 100 guests" at Documenta X (1997, curated by Catherine David), which hosted 100 talks during the exhibition, and to the four Documenta discussion platforms across the globe prior to the opening of

Documenta XI (2002, curated by Okwui Enwezor et al.). See *Documenta XI*, exhibition catalogue (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Kantz, 2002).

8
Another key example is unitednationsplaza, a project in Berlin in 2006-2007 (the exhibition as art school), now continued in New York as night school and in this reincarnation connected to Mårten Spångberg's project of "Evening Classes" at the YourSpace.com section of the A.C.A.D.E.M.Y exhibition.

9
Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2001).

10
Fearless Speech, 19-20.

11
Fearless Speech, 170.