



THE FUTURE AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOL

Interview by
Vivian Ziherl

The Public School is an autonomously organising direct-education project initiated in Los Angeles in 2007. Identified as ‘a school with no curriculum’, The Public School sessions are developed from the starting point of a class request posted to a website which then gathers a student body and, finally, a teacher. At the time of writing, classes scheduled included a *Semiotext(e)* intervention series reading group, a Chinatown Outdoor Summer Chess Club and a session titled *The Future of the Public School*. Curator Vivian Ziherl talks with Sean Dockray, initiator of The Public School and co-director of its home base, the Telic Arts Exchange.

Vivian Ziherl: When we met late last year, you were in the midst of preparations for the *Continental Drift/Control Society/Metamorphosis* symposium that accompanied the March 4th, University of California strike and you had also recently received an effective ‘cease and desist’ from Verso in relation to AAARG.ORG.¹ How did these two culminating points pan out?

Sean Dockray: Fortunately, neither of these two things were actually culminating points. The seminar was over eighteen hours long and lasted two days, with an average of thirty people in our little space the whole time. Each day was split into four sections: *Disassociation, Financialization and the UC Crisis, Occupation/Collective Speech*, and an open discussion on Saturday, and then *Autonomous Spaces, Precarity*, a Brian Holmes lecture, and *Shareable Territories/Bifurcation* on Sunday. The conversation was extraordinarily active, inclusive, and precise. Obviously, the March 4th strike (coming a few days later) gave an urgency to the theoretical discussions. We are all meeting again, albeit a less intense regrouping, at the beginning of September for a class that Brian proposed, *The Future of The Public School*.

AAARG.ORG, which hosts many of the syllabuses and readings for classes at The Public School, has since received several more cease and desist letters, most notably from Macmillan (for, among other things, Marxist texts). Macmillan, an iPad partner that often focuses on academic texts, recently hired someone with experience

targeting piracy on behalf of the music industry. Obviously, this is another case where university students are conceived of as consumers, as carriers of debt for everything from degrees to consumer electronics to intellectual property.

VZ: Congratulations on the symposium. What is planned for the September class?

SD: To quote from Brian's class proposal, we'll 'look at the cultural roots of the current university crisis, and in that light ... explore the role that experiments like The Public School could play in re-imagining education'. There are a couple of essays by current University of California professors that will structure our conversation. Whereas *The Drift* was a highly planned seminar with multiple parts, stretching from morning until night, *The Future of the Public School* is more of an informal class doubling as a working group. Although the subject matter is pretty precise, we'll be coming together for a few hours each day to reconsolidate energy, plan actions in the fall, and simply continue the conversations from earlier in the year.

VZ: Brian describes a field of current activity — that could include projects like The Public School — as 'extraterritorial drift' and analyses them as a kind of 'third phase' and critical advancement of institutional critique. Are you interested in that particular art history or lineage?

SD: To be honest, I'm not very familiar with Brian's historicisation of institutional critique. I am a little more familiar with Gerald Raunig's writing, which also identifies a 'third phase' and my guess is that there are more commonalities than differences between the two. Raunig's proposition for 'instituent practices' — adapted from the writing of Paolo Virno — is interesting because of the way it escapes the logic of opposition: rather than thinking about an immutable structure that we either oppose or accept, we can think about an 'exit', in which new social forms are collectively produced, modifying the original, problematic structure in the process. It's exactly this idea, its promises, possibilities and problems that we were discussing in our recent thirteen-day long, roaming seminar in Berlin, *There is nothing less passive than the act of fleeing* (organised by Caleb Waldorf, Fiona Whitton and myself).

VZ: In discussing the Protoacademy, which was a similar kind of open-source knowledge exchange project to The Public School, Charles Esche talks about constructing the 'sculptural reality to the educational moment' which is 'the table and chairs and sitting there' and how 'that begins to give you some sort of ethics'.² It's interesting because, at the time that I visited Telic Arts Exchange,

you were talking about getting rid of the large square table that dominated the space. Is it still there, and how have you found navigating the question of generating such a ‘sculptural reality’?

SD: Our main space is about fifteen feet wide by twenty feet deep. The table, which is eight feet square and six inches thick, has an imposing presence in the room. At the time you visited, I was concerned that a large table (nearly impossible to remove) would limit the types of classes that we could offer and there was the possibility that we would design a modular, flexible system that could accommodate all kinds of classes, including ones that required an empty space.

Unfortunately such a system is expensive and, more than that, we really loved that massive, iconic table. So I ultimately bought a motorcycle jack and retrofitted the legs of the table to be detachable. This means that the table doubles as a one-foot-tall, floating stage when we remove the legs and lower it to the floor. As it turns out, these two modes have been more than adequate for the various classes that we have, particularly when it is oriented in different ways.

There are several remarkable aspects to the table: first, it is square and so there is no obvious place to sit and no hierarchy that it defines in advance; also, it is so large that the middle of it is usually empty, a kind of neutral and useless space; finally, even though it is large and square, it allows for many different configurations of bodies. Every class in our space begins with people filtering in and figuring out how to position themselves in relation to this pretty unfamiliar object. In fact, that makes me think about our seminar in Berlin, which obviously didn’t make use of such a table because we met at a different location in the city every day. But before the discussion started, we always had to figure out quite literally how to find each other (in the middle of a busy park for instance) and then how to occupy a space in the city and how to sit in relation to one another.

VZ: Something very particular seems to be at play in Los Angeles that facilitates the success of The Public School. There’s an expanded art community that shares a broad familiarity and ease with a pedagogical methodology — so for example not turning up to an event expecting to listen to a panel, but rather to take part in a workshop. An obvious factor is the very living history of CalArts [California Institute of the Arts] with figures like Kaprow and Asher. So a field of practice that has been dilated by work over many years — or it could also be the nice weather or a response to the alienation of a highway city. Coming from Boston originally,

how have you experienced and come to understand the Los Angeles context?

SD: I am currently much more familiar with Los Angeles than I am with Boston (a city that I haven't even visited in about ten years). But at the time that I moved here, I had never been to the state of California before and I'd only been west of New York once. Nonetheless, the mythology of Los Angeles precedes the city itself and so one moves there already having lived there in a sense. One part of this mythology is the sense of openness, that almost anything is possible, or at least almost anything goes. More practically, there is a very rich history of artist-initiated spaces, activist and community centres, and strange offshoots of the entertainment, military, or education systems. And Los Angeles is a place with a lot of art schools, which produce lots of young artists every year. I think a lot of people try and unravel Los Angeles, or explain it or pin it down, and they tend to conclude with the idea that it is better left unexplained, or maybe just unexplainable.

VZ: Perhaps the inexplicable is important to The Public School. As though in 'exiting' the institutions of art circulation you've kept the position of artworks to provoke questions, and created a space in which to provoke questions, and with that you've kept the notion of the questions being expansive rather than reductive.

SD: Roland Barthes has a nice lecture on 'questions' in his 1977 seminar on 'The Neutral' (which we read in Berlin). He describes the question as a way for the questioner to assert power over the other person, to coerce them to reveal themselves, such that simply by answering they acquiesce to that system of power (regardless of the content of their answer). This is one way to describe the structure of oppositional politics, where demands made in the language of power might change the faces but not the situation. Barthes outlines a taxonomy of diversions, silences, and other non-answers or beside-the-point responses, which seem to open up spaces for imagination and invention. ■

1. AAARG.ORG is a digital library and file-sharing site hosting texts related to topics spanning the critical history of art, architecture, theory, political and poetic writing.

2. Charles Esche & de Appel CP, 'Stand I Don't', in Paul O'Neill and Mich Wilson (eds.), *Curating and the Educational Turn*, Open Editions/de Appel, London/Amsterdam, 2010, p 307.