

Art as Occupation: What Happens to Knowledge?

In my view, an art academy, at the moment, is a site of occupation, in a different meaning of the word. Why occupation? It is not so obvious. I started thinking about this when I found a tiny quote, actually a footnote, in a text by a group that calls itself the “Carrot Workers Collective.” This quote simply acknowledged something very simple, namely the fact that the European Union has changed its language so that every time it wants to write the words “employment” or “labor,” it instead writes the word “occupation.”

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The words “labor,” “work,” and “employment” have disappeared from the official language, and now they are talking about “occupation” instead. This seems like a very tiny and totally trivial shift of vocabulary, but I think actually it is not trivial at all, since work and occupation are completely different things. Work is an instrumental relationship, meaning that one is not doing it for its own sake; either one is doing it to earn a wage or to produce something such that one has a product at the end of the day—but one is not doing it for its own sake. Whereas occupation is different; occupation is something that does not necessarily hinge on any result, that does not necessarily have a conclusion. Most importantly, an occupation is something that many people think contains its own gratification, meaning one can do it just in order to be distracted, or to keep oneself busy. It does not necessarily mean that one is going to get paid at the end of the day, or that there is any remuneration attached to it, or that it is seen as a potentially never-ending process. So that is one meaning of occupation: occupation is something that, in many cases, presents an end in itself.

Somehow we can say that this is the first meaning of occupation, but there are obviously other meanings to the term, for example the meaning of military occupation. I copy-pasted a JPEG image from a blog that is called “oc-

cupation.blogspot.com,” and I have no idea what it is actually showing: it is a very mysterious activity, in which a helicopter is either dropping a house on the ground or taking it away—we don’t really know. In any case, it refers to the fact that occupation, in its military sense, relates to constructing a very complicated architecture—a very complex space is being developed, which I and other people have been calling “3-D sovereignty,” referring to extreme power relations. So military occupation is of course something that is imposed from the occupier to the occupied, and the objective is, many times, expansion—spatial expansion—but also a stranglehold, neutralization, and the quelling of autonomy of the people who are being occupied.

What does this mean in the context of art? If we start speaking of occupation instead of work, in this context additional complications arise. What happens then to the *work of art*? Is it going to be an *occupation of art* or an *art of occupation*? I think that yes, it does partly transform into an occupation, because what used to materialize more or less exclusively as an object, or a product, which was an artwork before, now tends to appear as an activity, a performance, a process, a form of research, or a production of knowledge. The traditional work of art in its form as object has been largely supplemented by these occupational forms of the former work of art. If we combine that with the meaning that we have already established, then we could say that art as an occupation is process-based, and that it is also usually unpaid and potentially endless, as well as assumed to in itself offer gratification, keeping people busy and distracted. This is one aspect, and only one aspect, of the practice of art in many rather affluent countries. It becomes a quite popular occupational scheme, and the idea that it provides gratification and that it requires no remuneration is also quite accepted in the cultural workplace.

This also applies partly to art education, and this is where the art academy comes into the picture, because there are more and more post-graduate and even post-post-graduate programs where people are in a sort of occupational purgatory, a buffer zone for artists. You remember that message saying “buffering” on YouTube and other video sites, when data is downloading. Well the art academy is a zone of indefinite buffering. It is not yet a site of work, and it is still a place of education, so it is some sort of in-between space. And education as a whole tends to take longer and longer, creating its own occupations, which creates processes rather than works. It creates knowledge, engagements, and relationships, as well as more educators—people who are often involved often in such processes themselves. It also creates mediators, as well as in many cases guards.

And once we get to guards we can also apply the second meaning of “occupation” to everything I’ve listed—the military meaning, the meaning of the creation of a complex space of occupation that is a territory of segregation and of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. Which means that the architecture of occupation is not only bent on keeping people busy while not paying them, but also predicated on keeping out certain people, on withholding forces, on cutting off and barring access and slashing funds. These are also additional meanings of “occupation,” which apply not only to art education but also to the art sector as a whole, as is now evidenced in the UK, the Netherlands, and many other places.

Thus, to see art as an occupation generates two meanings that are seemingly in opposition, but that in fact in a very paradoxical way relate to each other when it comes to art education. Art education, on the one hand, works as an educational scheme for everybody who is involved in it (students, teachers, administrators, and so on), which essentially produces a process that keeps itself busy, and which is potentially endless. On the other hand, the art academy can also very quickly be subjected to the more military aspect of occupation—it can very quickly become a site of occupation in the sense of being deprived and subjected to endless bureaucratic checks, of being hollowed out, excluded, undermined, over-controlled, deserted, starved, and basically stuck. Since occupation means both, it means both incomplete inclusion and total exclusion. It is managing access and flow, bringing about very paradoxical results. In many cases there is too much artistic occupation, which is sort of running on empty, and, on the other hand, there is an architecture of occupation

that manages to completely shut down the infrastructure we need for art education and art production.

Let's look at another example. It is courtesy of Google Images, and is one of the prime examples of everything I am talking about. It is the figure of the intern, which may not apply that much to art education but does apply to any other venture related to art, such as galleries, museums, or artistic projects. Wherever you go you will have interns, and if you Google "intern," what you get is a picture that shows an unhappily smiling girl sitting at a counter behind a thick glass pane, with a sign stuck to it that reads: "Hello ;-) I'm a new intern."

This heartbreaking situation really for me represents the structure of this occupational architecture, meaning that she really is stuck behind the glass panel, looking for ways to communicate toward the other side, trying to smile, trying to put on a friendly face, and trying to produce her own subjectivity. Also, if you think about the term "intern," it is very interesting since it also refers to internment and confinement, to detention, which may be voluntary or involuntary, and this is also echoed by the feeling that she really is locked up behind a glass pane. On the one hand she is inside labor—she has to work constantly—and on the other hand she is excluded from remuneration, excluded from payment, stuck in a space that includes the outside and excludes the inside simultaneously. As a result she has to work in order to sustain her own occupation. Another girl I found on Google was named Justine, which gave me the idea that one could read the Marquis de Sade's famous novel *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue*, about the total degradation of a young female, as a metaphor for the contemporary fate of the intern.

Now there is one short passage in my paper that I am going to present as bullet points. Art is not only a site of occupation, but also in many cases an occupational activity, meaning that it tends to invade whole lives as well. Art is something that spills out of its traditional zones of activity and starts invading lives by transgressing the boundaries of what formally has been called artistic autonomy. The avant-gardes of the twentieth century were trying to dissolve art in life, but now it is actually the other way around: life is quickly dissolving within art, and this phenomenon is invading more and more territories. Life is subjected to widespread aestheticization, and the border between art and life, which was so violently attacked by avant-gardes, has by now been trampled under, but by capital interests—and from

the side of art, not from the side of life. The division of spheres of life (labor/leisure, art/non-art, domestic/productive labor and the division of labor as such) has collapsed within senseless multitasking and the fusion and confusion of professions, occupations, and activities, all understood as ends in themselves, not means.

The following is a quick checklist for one to check whether one has been occupied by art, and my guess is that the answer will be “yes” to one or another of these questions, or actually to all of them.

- Does art possess you in the form of endless self-performance?
- Do you wake up feeling like a multiple?
- Are you on constant auto-display?
- Have you been beautified, improved, or upgraded, or have you attempted to do this to anyone/anything else?
- Have your feelings been designed, or do you feel designed by your iPhone?
- Or, is access to art (and its production) on the contrary being withdrawn, slashed, cut off, impoverished, and hidden behind insurmountable barriers?
- Is labor in this field unpaid?
- Do you live in a city that redirects a huge chunk of its cultural budget to funding a one-off art show?
- Is conceptual art from your region privatized by predatory banks?
- Has your rent doubled because a few kids with paintbrushes were relocated into that dilapidated building next door?

Of course this last question relates to something that many of us who have lived in larger cities are familiar with. Especially in Berlin, it is obvious that art is a tool for the gentrification of certain areas, and in those cases it is really connected to spatial occupation, because initially buildings are left empty, and are not open to new uses, occupied by security companies that try to keep them off-limits. But then artists slowly try to invade the buildings in order to make photos that they try to sell as coffee-table books. Once that process happens—when an area is aesthetically gentrified—then the real-estate-based gentrification will start, by artists moving into that area, thus raising rent and so on. So, on that level, occupation has a very spatial meaning that is connected to art practices. This is the only example I will really go into in detail, because all of the other ones are sort of obvious.

I'll now return to to the question "What should an art academy be?," because I think that until now I have been talking about the current state of art education as a state of occupation. After all I said, there can only be one answer to this question, which relates to the third meaning of the word "occupation" (definitely not something that I have come up with myself, because it has happened many times during recent months and years). This meaning is to occupy the art academy. To occupy it in any sense, in any dimension—to appropriate it, to inhabit it, to take back what has always been yours. To occupy the gallery, the white cube, the black box. To fill it with exchange and encounter. If activities there are going to be free anyway, then have sex, for Heaven's sake, rather than engaging in a boring production of knowledge. Then go to work. There is no time to lose. Do it now.

Edited by Mara Ambrožič & Angela Vettese

Art as a Thinking Process

Visual
Forms of
Knowledge
Production

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