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NEGATING THE INSTITUTION: REFLECTIONS
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**If access has
moved from a
question of rights
(who has access?)
to a matter of
legality and
economics (what
are the terms and
price for access,
for a particular**

**person?), then
over the past few
decades we have
witnessed access
being turned
inside-out, in a
manner reminiscent
of Marx's 'double
freedom' of the
proletariat, in which**

**we have access
to academic
resources but
are unable to
access each other**

Sean Dockray



Tim Ivison & Tom Vandeputte

CONTESTATIONS

There has been a distinct renewal of critical interest in education, both as a field of experimentation and as a mode of political and social organisation. Artists, activists, theorists and educators have become involved in a broad range of alternative practices, varying from informal reading groups and seminars to self-organised schools, community-based pedagogical experiments, and online learning platforms. Many of these projects are based on a distinct premise: that the process and space of learning can be a political experiment in and of itself. The heterogeneous forms of organisation and engagement they employ are seen as a way of cultivating discourse and community, raising consciousness, formulating new problems and finding new strategies of response.

These alternative and experimental approaches have come into focus at a moment when the traditional academic system finds itself under enormous pressure.

We have witnessed a marked intensification of the neoliberalisation of education, a process that has been underway for at least the last two decades. In many parts of the world, the implementation of austerity policies in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis has resulted in a sustained attack on education, putting at risk the funding and spatial resources of academic institutions, as well as their educational objectives. The purpose of the university is increasingly understood in terms of attendance numbers, evaluation procedures and efficiency regulation; institutions are forced to restructure, commodify, privatise and close down departments that do not conform or compete. Supported by national and international policy agreements, local and state governments, police and private security forces, these measures are not simply an inevitable effect of economic contraction, but rather a deliberate and sustained political intervention in the sphere of higher education. A market logic is now instilled across all fields of teaching and research, throwing the relative autonomy of the university into question.

Although recent experiments in education emerge from many specific motivations, the higher education crisis has given them new and broader political relevance. Self-organised schools and alternative learning platforms can be understood both as critical responses to the academic establishment and as speculative attempts to develop viable alternative spaces and models of learning. As mainstream institutions continue to raise tuitions and privatised campuses, prospective students are turning to short courses, night schools, free schools and self-organised learning spaces in the margins. Additionally, ad hoc educational initiatives have recently appeared as an integral part of protest movements in both Europe and the Americas, where the topic of education has been a specific flashpoint.

This book brings together a number of critical reflections on education as a form of political engagement. Our aim is to identify the key questions and problems posed by educational experiments and draw out new concepts and strategies developed in response to the present crisis. Through this collection of essays, interviews, and conver-

sations, we seek to underline a common project that all of these practices, to a greater or lesser extent, seem to share: the contestation of the current direction of academic institutions, and the attempt to rethink the structures and spaces of learning on a fundamental level.

The essays gathered here take up positions along a spectrum of engagement. While some contributors work from within mainstream institutions of learning and attempt to carve alternative paths for educators and students, others have abandoned or exiled themselves from such structures to pursue alternatives. Together, these texts address a variety of organisational and pedagogical concerns, ranging from programme curricula to institutional economies; from the student-teacher division, to models of collective learning. Rather than functioning as a comprehensive survey of critical education, this book presents a cross-section of the discourse by offering different starting points for further discussion and experimentation.

Contestations appears in the context of a trenchant discourse on the education

crisis and its political economy, as well as proliferating discussions on arts education, the engagement of artists with education, and strategies of self-organisation. We share many of the questions and concerns that have emerged from these discussions: the desire to experiment with new institutions and learning communities; the struggle against technocratic neoliberal management and funding; the increasing externalisation of the basic provisions of education into cultural sectors ill-equipped to fill in the gaps; and perhaps even the specific problems that this situation might pose for art and design education.

While the current discourse is often argued from the standpoint of university programmes, museums and non-profit institutions (that is to say, from the vantage point of the administrators of culture and education), this book focuses on the practices situated in the cracks of these institutions, and what lies beyond their walls. It seems that this shift in attention from institution to practice can reveal a more fundamental rethinking of the forms and structures of education: one that could start from the

experience of learners and teachers, while engaging in a search for new goals and criteria that may or may not lead back to existing models. Once marginal and tactical, the discourses and practices discussed here increasingly represent practical, even necessary steps towards post-neoliberal learning.

London, April 2013

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi interviewed
by Tim Ivison & Tom Vandepitte

AUTONOMY AND GENERAL INTELLECT

TI / TV – The ongoing crisis in higher education has recently intensified as a result of widespread government austerity measures. In order to effectively respond to the crisis, it seems imperative to have an adequate description of its functioning in practical and theoretical terms. In that sense, what is your analysis of the situation of higher education today?

FB – During the past decade, the European ruling class launched an overall attack against the principles of mass education. This attack, whose primary target is the privatisation of the school and of the university, is the assertion of neoliberal ideology in the field of knowledge, research and information. This implies the primacy of the economic paradigm of profit and competition in science and education, and therefore the cancellation of the autonomy

of knowledge as the essential feature of the modern institution of the university. Autonomy does not only mean the political independence of the university as an institution, but also and mainly, the epistemological principle of the freedom of research.

In a way, the crisis of the university was already embedded in the inability of modern humanism to cope with the acceleration and complexity of the infosphere. The university of the past, as we have inherited it from modernity, is unable to deal with networked intelligence. Yet the crisis of the university is precipitating because the financial dictatorship is destroying every space of autonomy for intellectual life. The context nowadays is marked by the financial attack on the mass education system, the dismantlement of the general intellect, the definancing of the public school, the barbarisation of society. The educational system is under aggression because the financial dictatorship is plundering the resources of society and destroying the very foundations of modern civilisation.

All of this can happen because the financial class has no interest in the future.

The old bourgeoisie was interested in the future of the territory and the urban community because they could only sell goods produced in factories and therefore reproduce their wealth thanks to the prosperity of the territory. The old industrial bourgeoisie was a strongly territorialised class – it was the class of the *bourg*, of the city. Financial accumulation, on the contrary, is not based on selling useful goods to the community or on the prosperity of the territory. It is based on the game of buying and selling financial products whose usefulness is nothing. In the bourgeois industrial economy, money was used as a tool for the production of goods, and the production of goods was the necessary step for the accumulation of money (money–goods–money).

Financialisation has changed the process: money is producing money without any production of useful things – physical and semiotic. Financial products are just simulations that trigger the accumulation of more simulation, and this simulation is devastating the world, as we see with the present European crisis. The process of privatisation has totally destroyed the

autonomy of the university and its ability to produce knowledge. There is no knowledge without epistemological autonomy, and there is no epistemological autonomy when capitalist dogma is submitting knowledge to the obsession of profit and competition and growth. Now more than ever we have to invest our political and cultural energy into the creation of an autonomous process of self-education, of research and transmission of knowledge.

TI / TV – You have written extensively on cognitive labour and mass education in relation to political struggles. How do these concepts inform your understanding of the historical basis for contemporary education struggles?

FB – Mass scholarisation is the meeting point of two historical processes: the worker's push for emancipation and the technological transformation of capitalist production, which is possible thanks to the application of cognitive labour. During the twentieth century, the conflict between workers and capital took the form of a

continuous push towards redistribution of wealth – the increase of wages – but also, and mainly, it was a push towards the emancipation from industrial slavery, which took the immediate form of reduction of labour time. Capitalism responded to this pressure by introducing machines – concrete manifestations of the scientific and technological application of the 'general intellect'.

Marx speaks of general intellect in the *Grundrisse*, particularly in the 'Fragment on Machines'. This expression refers to the productive potency of science and technology, which is the effect of the cooperation of intellectual workers. In the 1960s, Italian compositionist thought, usually known as *operaismo*, developed a conception based on this premise: that the productive force of science and technology can replace the physical activity of industrial workers. Thanks to the application of intellectual potency, capital can increase productivity and develop innovation and new products. At the same time, physical fatigue is replaced by machines. In this way, replacing industrial work by intellectual activity is a common interest of capitalists and workers.

In the second part of the century, mass scholarisation opened a possibility of emancipation for the working class: the worker's 'refusal of work' entered into contact with the 'general intellect'. The student movements of 1968 can be seen as the first insurrection of the general intellect: the solidarity between students and workers was not only an ideological effect but also the alliance of two social subjects that shared the same interests. First, students were the harbingers of the intellectual potency. They were able to increase productivity and use technology to emancipate human beings from the slavery of physical labour. And workers, conscious of the obsolescence of the industrial mode of production, were pushing towards the reduction of labour time. This alliance marked the emergence of the technological replacement of industrial labour with the info-machine and opened the way to a large process of emancipation, and of transformation. The digital revolution can be seen as the final point of this historical movement: engineers, researchers, technicians and info-workers created the possibility

of emancipation of human time from the slavery of industrial work. Unfortunately the slavery of networked work was coming, as the capitalist form had not been dismantled.

This process of emancipation was perverted and disrupted by neoliberal philosophy in the last decades of the past century. The neoliberal revolution (or counter-revolution to be precise) twisted the force of the general intellect against the workers' autonomy. Technology that had offered the possibility of emancipation became a tool for control. The increase in productivity, which potentially opened the way to a general reduction of labour time, was turned into a tool for increased exploitation, while the limitations on work times were removed, and unemployment rose as an effect of the increased work time of the individual. The potential of the general intellect has therefore been fully exploited by capital, but this exploitation has happened against the social interest.

As cognitive labour was, in those years, becoming the main force of valorisation, capital attacked the movements and tried to subject them to an ideology of merit,

or meritocracy, and struck the social solidarity of the intellectual force. Meritocracy is the Trojan horse of neoliberal ideology; it identifies intellectual ability with economic reward. Meritocracy is not actually based on intellectual or technical skills, but on competition between individuals in a prospect of aggressive self-affirmation. Precariousness is the hotbed of meritocracy. When individuals are obliged to fight for survival, intellectual or technical ability is reduced to a tool for economic confrontation. When solidarity is broken and competition becomes the rule, research and discovery are disconnected from pleasure and solidarity, they are reduced to instruments for economic competition. The student movements from 1968–77 therefore mark the emerging consciousness of the material interests of the intellectual force. At the same time they demonstrate the need for a process of autonomisation in learning and research.

TI / TV – In your work you have emphasised the importance of the free radios and other forms of media activism in the movements of the late 1960s and 70s. What do you

consider to be their particular force or effectiveness? In our own research we have taken a particular interest in critical experiments in education as a form of creative resistance, but here we might turn it around and instead ask: to what extent can media activism be understood as a form of self-education in its own right?

FB – Media activism has been and is the first space of self-organisation of cognitive labour. The experience of free radios in the 70s is an early example of how protest and refusal of capitalist rule can turn into the self-organisation of cognitarian workers (ie, technicians, journalists) and the creation of an autonomous sphere of communication. I use the word ‘cognitarian’ in order to refer to these precarious cognitive workers; I see the cognitive side of the productive activity of the mental workers, but also the proletarian side that is hidden, forgotten, denied by the ideological description of the networked economy. They are the avant-garde of the cognitarian emancipation to come. Throughout the past decades, thousands and thousands of journalists, writers, artists,

technicians and programmers who have been marginalised by the corporate system of the mediascape have opted for self-organisation and have created an autonomous sphere of information, subversion and self-formation.

The free radio movement has been an experiment in technological self-education and the creation of a horizontal network of information. In the Italian experience for instance, the interconnection of the telephone and the radio broadcast was crucial during the 1970s. The telephone gave people the possibility of intervening in the radio's flow of information. As far as the Italian mediascape was concerned, this was absolutely new. The political innovation of the free radio movement was essentially based on this: the radio is the voice of people who have never had the opportunity to speak. From this point of view the philosophy of the internet was already at work in the free radio movement of the 1970s.

TI / TV – Earlier in this conversation you argued for the need to invest in autonomous processes of self-education. Where would

you locate the struggles in education: inside or outside of the university?

FB – Both inside and outside. Outside of the university, we have to create concepts for the new institutions of research and transmission of knowledge. SCEPSI (European School of Social Imagination), which we launched in San Marino and Barcelona in 2011, is an attempt to create the concept of an institution based on the political and epistemological autonomy of knowledge. From time to time, a group of researchers, philosophers, scientists and activists meet publicly, thanks to the availability of existing institutions (museums, academies, universities) that lend their spaces and resources for the organisation of nomadic lectures, which develop the common programme of a sceptical form of interdisciplinary research. As a concept, SCEPSI is an experiment in exemplifying the possible functioning of an institution based on this autonomy in the age of the networked general intellect. While the neoliberal restructuring of the university is based on the separation of the humanities from the scientific branches

of knowledge, SCEPSI aims to find interdisciplinary answers to interdisciplinary questions. While the neoliberal form of the university and the school is based on the dogmatic idea that knowledge must be rentable in economic terms, merit equals competition, and profit is the goal of research and of innovation, SCEPSI refuses any dogma – any truth, any preconceived order of priorities. While the neoliberal university and school uses the internet as a tool for implementing the economic profitability of knowledge, we try to conceive of the internet as an environment of life, affection and knowledge, not as an instrument.

On the other hand, we have to act inside the decaying institution of the university. We have to go into the corpse of what used to be the living organism of the educational system in order to mobilise and autonomise as many cognitarians as we can. We need to organise the exodus of poets, engineers, artists and scientists – a self-organisation of knowledge inside the very place of intellectual subjection.



/ PROTOCOLS FOR A LISTENING SESSION / have been composed by Ultra-red for organizing collective listening to pre-recorded sounds. The protocols seek to put the recording and its listeners into process by privileging the ear that hears over the sound recording itself. [Los Angeles, 60 min, 25. 06. 2011]

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- 1 *Introductions* – To begin; invite every person in the group to introduce herself or himself by name, any organizational affiliation and the kind of work that they do. Participants can also say what they want to hear the group talk about.
- 2 *Listen to the sound objects* – Play a series of sound recording one to two minutes in length, one at a time over the sound-system without introduction.
- 3 *"What did you hear?"* – After playing each sound recording, ask the group, "What did you hear?" Write exactly what is said, even duplications onto flip-chart paper.
- 4 *Tell the story* – Ask the person who made the recording to tell the story behind the sound; not to validate or invalidate the responses but as another object for reflection.
- 5 *"What did you hear?"* – After the story has been told, ask the group, "What did you hear?" Write exactly what is said, even duplications onto flip-chart paper.
- 6 *Repeat steps #2 to #5 for each sound recording.*
- 7 *Analyze what is heard* – Compare the responses to all the recordings and stories. Note the responses that are convergent and, especially, those that are divergent.
- 8 *Discuss the theme(s)* – Discuss the most urgent issues to emerge from the responses to the sound recordings. The tendency in such discussions can be to arrive at an agreement on the important themes. The process of agreement often attempts to resolve differences in experience or knowledge. Give attention to those divergences not as differences to be conquered or argued but as problems to be investigated.
- 9 *Write the theme(s)* – Compose the theme in the form of a question or a proposition that will be researched in actual lived experiences, either one's own or within those communities where the theme organizes the experience of everyday life.

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STUDENTS: REFUSE YOUR ROLES

STRIKE today:
against education as
market conditioning
against the student
as commodity
for the reclamation
of all social life

THE CULT OF WORK
THE STATE
CAPITAL
THE PRIMACY OF ROLES
THE HIERARCHICAL ORDER

each wing of boredom
of routine
of the policed life
must be turned to beautiful rubble

RENEW YOUR DESIRES
TO LIVE IS AN ECSTATIC CRIME

**FOR EVERY BUREAUCRAT, COP,
CAPITALIST, USURPER,
& LEADER**

THE TRASH HEAP

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