

Suspended Vocation by the Movement of 20 October, 2010

Anthony Davies, Nils Norman,
and Howard Slater

NARRATOR	older female
RESPONDENT 1	young female
RESPONDENT 2	male
RESPONDENT 3	male
POET	male
HISTORIAN	older male

The set is a classroom, or it could be a cultural center, or a pub. On the back wall is a long chalkboard on which is drawn a rather complex diagram. There is a long, rough oak table littered with a few candles, bottles of wine, glasses, wrappers, cigarettes, and papers at which the three RESPONDENTS sit with the POET and the HISTORIAN. Smoke hangs in the air, and it should appear that a conversation has been going on for some time. The NARRATOR sits in a comfortable chair off to the side, illuminated by a smart floor lamp. The NARRATOR reads steadily, yet tentatively, without much authority,

with nothing proclamatory in her intonation. As if to say, “It’s no big deal”—relaxed, she reads relaxedly, informally, as if she were saying, “This is just the beginning ... there’s more to come.” She read as if it’s difficult fun.

Lights up slowly on the seated group.

NARRATOR. It’s the day that the governor of the Bank of England has announced a decade of sobriety, and here they are, having a drink in the Plough, in Central London. It’s the day of the big cutbacks announced by the ConLib coalition as part of the British government’s annual spending review. Maybe they should begin with the cuts to education? Does it have any bearing on what they’ve been doing together over the past few years, particularly with projects linked to the School of Walls and Space Department? It could be said that what they’ve been up to points more toward what might be called postcapitalist forms of educational engagement ... insofar as they’ve not set themselves in “opposition” to cuts, or to the educational system as it currently presents itself.

The only word they’ve got is *curriculum*. Is that why they’re here? to formalize something? But one of them finds herself in a strange situation: she has not been to university and is not really enamored of higher education. She suggests how un—historically minded people can be when they claim that any initiative not backed by the state is somehow free market or neoliberal and how this seems to neglect the historical example of a workers’ movement that was replete with non—state funded autodidact initiatives.

Is this what is being hijacked at the moment? The idea of the Big Society, of free schools, is another example of how

neoliberalism has been very adept at consuming these initiatives and regurgitating them as a distorted market variant. It's very close to what they've been working on. Aren't they themselves in danger of carrying out a program that the state now wants? How do they differentiate between what the state demands and what they themselves regard as politically necessary?

But one of them says that what is touted as a free school today is a more smoothly functioning formal education, a more or less professional aping of what already exists. He points to the diagram.

RESPONDENT 2. [*pointing to the diagram*] The state wants to focus solely on the "form-funnel" structure so as to improve the end result of product and knowledge. So, for this one the "Big Society" is just another form of concept-management, a way to inveigle surplus value out of people. Maybe they better think of the content of a free-school initiative? How the content can be deforming.

NARRATOR. They fall to wondering whether what's being talked up is another form of primitive accumulation. A situation in which the last vestiges of communal activity are taken away, to be repoliticized ideologically and given another value, another meaning. Maybe this is something that their proposed curriculum might have to spell out in a different language, a different form of reproduction that is not complicit with this idea of the Big Society.

Might the problem lie at the level of formal content? The work they've been doing over the past few years, the role of improvisation in challenging "specialized" knowledge enclosures, the formal transfer of knowledge—knowledge that can be placed in the market, knowledge that can be quantified, measured, assessed. They've tried to work on a different set of relations, to home in on the knowledge that's generated

between people, in social relations: the general intellect.
This, it is offered ...

RESPONDENT 2. is the opposite of the neoliberal dead zone of the Big Society.

NARRATOR. But where does this leave experimental pedagogy?
A respondent says,

RESPONDENT 1. It leaves it having to deal with an educational system that's forming human capital. The generalized state of produced subjectivity today is formed as human capital—an investment in the self that institutes conformity to the tropes of capitalism. So, is the experimental better located in the Small Society? Does it include an improvisatory element and a sense of each one's immeasurable experience: the micro situations that challenge pedagogy? Is the experimental allied *with* desire? What vector does desire want to lead itself along? Or is it informed of where to go? Is it dictated to? Is it seduced? Is it down here [*gesturing toward the diagram*], the form funnel? Or is it drawn toward value and Knowledge/Power? Or does it meander—as it says here on the diagram—or generate its own process? Is it moving toward an unformed type of zone?

NARRATOR. An interjection proposes that ...

RESPONDENT 2. The unformed zone is what we were trying to do with the “Going Fragile” week at the School of Walls and Space in Berlin. Improvisation was linked to an element that was almost group-therapeutic during the week: the encouragement of not just intellectual rational development, but also collective emotional development.

NARRATOR. One of them summarizes that they have an institution-funnel made up of what might be called measurable standards that coalesce around Knowledge/Power.

RESPONDENT 2. Then we have the immeasurable, improvisation, free-form desire. So the question we ask of the pending curriculum is how we create or set conditions that make it possible to move into the immeasurable. What is it that encourages or forces us all to move into the measurable? To go to university to gain degrees, to get jobs, to get homes, to get pensions, to gain a semblance of security?

RESPONDENT 1. But how is this process to be disrupted? In what place, in what time, in what relation is it challenged?

RESPONDENT 3. It's an almost unanswerable question. Is it in the points of transition in human social awareness that there are moments of trauma, for example, during adolescence?

RESPONDENT 2. Maybe this is being schematic, but is desire more raw at this time?

RESPONDENT 3. Is it at the moment we feel the seduction of knowledge and power, at the moment we sublimate our identity to a life purpose that the educational institution comes in to "save" us? It's a pressurized moment: a career ... a profession ... It's a moment that demands a decision. But what else is unveiled at this moment?

NARRATOR. This is what's interesting about the measurable/immeasurable dichotomy they noted earlier. How does this relate back to what they were doing with the School of Walls and Space? They certainly worked with a program that was immeasurable. In fact, the curriculum put out on that first day was rejected ... suspended indefinitely, replaced by a blank wall.

RESPONDENT 3. So, a part of this that's important is the idea of the curriculum as contract, because, in my view, it's about understanding what we're actually doing together. The contract can have a free-form component to it, but it's still about the

fact that we're doing something together with no discernible outcome and that we're in agreement about working together, and something might happen. With a curriculum, we're agreeing to a social relationship, and for the curriculum as a contract in the more free-form, spontaneous, improvisatory, and emotionally collective sense, it's about ...

NARRATOR. Trust. Then one of them mentions [*pointing to the diagram*] that the relationships inside the institution could be likened to the sadomasochistic contract, a negotiation of power.

RESPONDENT 2. In a way, it's what may have been missing during the "Going Fragile" week. We jumped to the conclusion that we could just go to here [*pointing to the free-form element of the diagram*] with trust, because of the text we'd compiled beforehand and because of what the students knew about us. ... But the people who were unknown to us didn't have proof of this sense of trust or practical evidence of our awareness of power relations. It wasn't at all our intention to be measuring anybody. Hence we had the issue of some students thinking, "Are we being manipulated?"

RESPONDENT 1. This again falls back into the projection and transference of the S&M contract and how the group therapy element takes on that character as well.

NARRATOR. From the mouth of a rebel poet comes a seemingly haphazard slogan:

POET. Perversion *is* the curriculum.

RESPONDENT 1. So ...

NARRATOR. She says in response to the inattentive poet,

RESPONDENT 1. Are we here to create a perverse curriculum that meets the criteria? Whose criteria?

NARRATOR. The historian adds,

HISTORIAN. The introduction of music into the curriculum at Portsmouth Polytechnic in the early 1970s was part of a perverse practice that may have been critically aligned to a more general and quiet process of structural change.

NARRATOR. He further adds,

HISTORIAN. Clearly for some working within educational institutions at the time—adjusting, tweaking the curriculum undercover, inside a fog of bureaucracy—the conditions were set in which a revolutionary subject or jolt to the system might be brought into play.

NARRATOR. At Portsmouth, where improvisation and free-form were part of the mix, the historian recalls,

HISTORIAN. This was precisely what happened: the longest occupation of a British art school in the 1970s. As with their “Going Fragile” reader, did they not also factor in a void, a deep hole, in which radically different social relations might emerge?

RESPONDENT 3. That’s okay, but this is clearly not where we’re coming from, as none of us have ever talked about the idea of adjusting, tweaking, working within existing institutional structures.

POET. So,

NARRATOR. Chimes in the poet,

POET. Outside these structures, the “perversion” can become more indulged, tolerated, less surreptitious. Liberating desire!

NARRATOR. But without this background, the curriculum as a contract of trust—which they don’t intend it to be—can be experienced differently. So, it was said, some just attacked them and claimed they were just a bunch of blokes doing something with young people. One of those assembled found that very much a problem. But his thought about the curriculum was that it could take them into another school, another place—into a free school, another Summerhill. That was his idea of the criteria. He understood it more as a test site or springboard for taking this experience and knowledge of a curriculum in formation to what might be called a shared practice. Maybe the contract that they were talking about was the means to sidestep that state-funded, free-market bind. But, one of them added,

RESPONDENT 1. It could be quite bourgeois to think that they had to set up a contract to build trust!

RESPONDENT 2. That’s as may be,

NARRATOR. One interjects,

RESPONDENT 2. But it’s the new form we were talking about—the contract becomes null and void. As with sadomasochism, can’t the examination of where the power relations are, how they can be played with, give rise to a growing sense of trust and emotional collectivity?

HISTORIAN. This has resonance with developments in the early British art school system of the 1960s and the formation of the first curriculum. In the case of St. Martins School of Art in London, for example, students were invited to respond to the educational “contract,” and this resulted in a challenge to

a perceived abuse of power; the privileging and stifling limits of middle-class, middle-aged, white culture. And it's important to acknowledge that this "right" to dissent and to contest was inscribed in the contract, so to speak; it was encouraged as part of the process. So, when we consider the "development" of art education over the last forty-odd years, it has clearly moved away from the "contract," down this form-funnel, and has been hauled into this zone [*gesturing to a series of spiraling vectors on the diagram*].

RESPONDENT 1. And that funnel has become so tight. That funnel is narrowing to a needle's point.

NARRATOR. The poet wants to run another fantasy.

POET. If the institution is a funnel-anus shitting out students, pedagogues, and academics as units of human capital, then we get back into the question of the actual benefit of the S&M discipline-punishment vibe, and now maybe is the time to run shock tactics on human capital, on the clean surfaces and conceptual aesthetics, on the aseptics of "intelligence" that bowel out from this factory!

Laughter, then a gradual return to serious attentiveness.

NARRATOR. One suggests that the shock maybe comes when students leave the institution, when they suddenly realize that they can't do very much with the measured and packaged learning they've received, that human capital isn't worth too much ... particularly now, in this climate of austerity and cutbacks, where there's no safety net offered by a welfare system. The poet continues,

POET. Maybe this curriculum should be constructed like a welfare system after people leave school, the art school? Only

after students have left is it possible to engage and set up a free school.

Lights dim on the group.

NARRATOR. So they now seem to be talking about a post-educational positioning and not about a curriculum as such. They would work off the shock and factor in this traumatic yet liberating moment and divert it toward a collaborative and communizing type of practice, because for them, this is clearly when human capital is shat out of the institutional funnel, has nowhere to go, and could feed into Marie Langer's notion of "building your own Centers of Psycho-Social Attention." By the end it is clear that none of those who have gathered as the "Movement of the 20th of October" are talking about intervening in primary, secondary, further, or higher education at the point where the "promise" of the system, the institution, is at its persuasive, coercive peak but more at the precise moment where the "promise," the contract, the guarantee, turns to dust—the day that students (and staff, other workers, et cetera) leave the building ... with nothing.

Are they saying that it's not really worth developing a curriculum now that they've identified the source of the problem—the machine that produces human capital? Are they saying instead that they'll move into the night? Was this, as one of them said, was this particular exchange in itself a divergence from a goal—the result of a process that overrides the need for a curriculum?

NARRATOR *stands and exits. Lights out on all.*

An Imagined Bauhaus

Colin Lang

A low, even light on the stage. A microphone is positioned center stage so that the speaker is in profile to the audience. The stage is otherwise empty except for a black scrim, not immediately apparent, at the rear. This serves as a screen for the projection of documentation from the succession of installations of Raum 19 by the German artist Imi Knoebel.

STAGEHANDS 1 and 2 enter stage right and stop short. COLIN enters stage left and takes position in front of the microphone. STAGEHANDS exit right. The audience sees COLIN in profile. He is young, with longish dark hair. He wears a cream corduroy blazer and jeans and carries in his arms a bundle of manila folders. He doesn't acknowledge the audience, appearing rather preoccupied with his material. He is obviously a professor in the humanities. He's being considered for a tenure-track position at the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth, where he'll be one of the youngest professors in the department.

COLIN. Art education had two faces in West Germany in the mid-1960s. There were the applied arts and crafts, the industrial, utilitarian, commercially driven programs meant to direct otherwise aimless youth into the gaping maw of West Germany's economic miracle. These were *Kunstgewerbe* programs, the *Werkkunstschule*, and programs by many other monikers, all making up for the instrumentalized curricula known formerly as the Bauhaus.

On the other hand, there were the traditional fine arts schools, where students were taught to draw from nude models, to sculpt from plaster and clay, and to carry on as if art would always be there, culture's abiding wet nurse in times both prostrate and prosperous. Many students made their way from one place to the other, creating a generation of Janus-faced pupils who now no longer looked both backward and forward, but inward, perpetually divided against themselves, split at their emergence as potential young artists between art and design, the aesthetic and the useful, craft and something like creativity.

STAGEHANDS 1 and 2 again approach from stage right and place a low wooden platform stage center between COLIN and the audience, then exit.

This was the story of four young students who found themselves at the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, enrolled in Joseph Beuys' master class on monumental sculpture. What did these students know about sculpture? What experience, academic or existential, brought them to Room 20 where their teacher, their new mentor, would kneel on the floor in a fishing vest and fedora and draw inscrutable diagrams on blackboards and on the ground? For Imi Giese, Jörg Immendorff, Imi Knoebel, and Blinky Palermo, Beuys' style had no precedent, no pedagogical analogue in their collective experience. They had all made their way to Beuys