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Where Do Contemporary Academies/Art Schools Collide with Artistic Praxis?¹

Jozef Kovalčík

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Abstract:

Art schools are an integral part of the framework of institutions entering the formation of artistic practice and play one of the most important roles in the reproduction of so-called high culture. Nevertheless, academies have not undergone as radical criticism in recent decades as other art institutions. Studio teaching, which was introduced in art schools in the nineteenth century, continues to dominate. A few decades later, avant-garde artists also began to teach at art schools, but the method of

teaching did not change in any significant way, while the ambition to create an individualistic work was further strengthened and persists to this day. In this essay, I will try to describe how the model of studio teaching came into being, what ideas it has been based on and what it is the bearer of. In the last part I will point out that the model of “masterclasses” is unsustainable for both traditional and (post) avant-garde artistic practices, but that it collides the most with the creation of participatory and environmental art projects.

Keywords: Art Schools (Academies) – Studio Teaching – Avant-Gardes – Participatory Art – Individualism

The author is the director of Slovak Arts Council.

josef.kovalcik@fpu.sk

Academies, as institutions of higher learning, cannot possibly be omitted in any attempt to understand how local art scenes function, or in analyses of the global artworld. They are institutions that shape expectations and ideas about the realization of works of art, and about the methods of producing and presenting them. For the reproduction of so-called “high culture”, and for maintaining continuity in all artistic fields, they have become indispensable. Despite holding this strategically important position, in recent decades they have not been subjected to such radical institutional criticism as, for example, galleries, museums and theatres. If we leave aside the various personal scandals, conflicts about the filling of teaching posts, and internal discussions on cosmetic amendments to study plans, we may say that nothing serious has been happening around the academies. Analysis of the art schools has been lacking for a long time, in terms of their functioning, aesthetic preferences, ideas about the results of the teaching process, and power relations. Thanks to the greater accessibility of art education, an ever-increasing number of men and women who are active artists have university degrees in their hands, and thereby the academies secure and strengthen their position still further. And this perhaps is a further reason why they ought to be radically brought into question, because if one views them vis-à-vis the challenges of our time, the disparity is impossible to overlook.

Defending the current form of the art schools, James Elkins declares that any more fundamental change in the teaching of art would change our understanding of art also.² One can agree wholeheartedly with this statement, though given the magnitude of contemporary social and environmental challenges, his conviction that nothing essential needs to be changed would seem difficult to defend. Ecological, participative and communitarian art projects are precisely those whose compatibility with present-day art education requires a considerable input of imagination. But is it really so, or can fine-tuning and enrichment of current educational procedures be sufficient? According to Peter Bürger, in the post-avantgarde phase we have reached the point of a restoration of the category of the work³; but does that mean we cannot make new evaluations of how to teach the methods of producing it? The art schools have opened their doors to a larger number of students, but can they indeed be considered democratic institutions in this sense also, that they will genuinely engage with everyday and topical themes which have resonance beyond the intellectual minority?

*Academies, the Public, and External
Factors in Artistic Formation*

From the time when academies were founded, preparation for the creation of works has been central to their reason for existence. This banal fact must be supplemented with one more: the realization, status and viewing of these artefacts is socially conditioned. In shaping their resultant form, however, there is incessant input by the expectations of “the gatekeepers” of the Artworld, who in a complex of power relations exert influence on the overall form of contemporary artistic production.⁴ On the other hand, student works may also be regarded as resultants of diverse information inputs and responses to a

2 James ELKINS, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2001, p. 108.

3 Peter BÜRGER, *Theories of the Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 55–59.

4 This reality is usually ignored in connection with the art schools, although it is highlighted perhaps to excess with regard to other practices and institutions.

variety of social phenomena with which the art sphere has nothing in common. Boris Groys highlights how many and varied are the external agents impacting on artistic formation, by which students are “tainted” in the course of a creative educational process.⁵ To identify all these sources of “infection” is doubtless interesting and important, but it is definitely not sufficient for an understanding of the tendency of current (student) art production. Breaking in upon “free” creative games and inspirations, there are the internal rules of the school, adherence to which is at all times immediately or latently enforced. Confrontation with the atmosphere and the settled rules of the academy, irrespective of their specialization, gives an acceptable ultimate form to unfettered inventiveness.

A proof of how educational procedures are made effective, and what significance this has, is the presentation of finished student works to the general public. Exhibition of these artefacts is one of the oldest traditions in the academies, and from the earliest times of their existence to the present day this indispensable part of the curriculum has customarily been borne in mind even in the construction of buildings. In any other field, such an obsession with the presentation of what are often transitional and not infrequently half-achieved outputs of study would be almost unimaginable. Undoubtedly there is an important disciplinary practice here which is part of a strategy of seeking individual expression, but it is also an in-process inspection, made more intensive by the fact that it involves a confrontation with public opinion. Apart from the obvious escalation of pressure for student results, this presentational practice serves also to reinforce a position of power vis-à-vis other art institutions and also society. In both instances one can find examples of harmonious and helpful functioning, but also tensions, conflicts and disputes, between the academic base and the external (artistic) environment. There may be occasional “essential” discontent with student results, and the manifestation of this is among the regular rituals demanded in the name of preserving dynamism in a tedious educational process, as well as in the art scene itself. Often, however, there are more fundamental disputes which not infrequently end in violent political or economic interventions in the academies’ functioning. It suffices to mention Central Europe’s totalitarian past, or its neoliberal present.

The regular presentation of student works may be described as a constant in which the functioning of academies is at odds with their relationship to society. The latter has undergone changes roughly from the early nineteenth century, and its nature has not changed in any conspicuous way since then. Nikolaus Pevsner points out that the academies acquired much greater freedom at that time, inasmuch as they were freed from dependence on the aristocracy and the church. That would not have been possible, however, without the powerful state, which assumed the responsibilities of the principal patron and considerably reinforced their position, as institutions responsible for producing art for the purposes of the government and court. This crucial about-turn in the financing of academies enabled a series of further changes in educational processes, of which the introduction of studio tuition has outstanding importance. Changes set in not only in the schools but also in how the creators of art began to conceive of their work and relate to their environment. “After this the artist regarded himself as the bearer of a message superior to that of State and society. Independence was consequently his sacred privilege.

5 Boris GROYS, “Education by Infection”, in: Steven Henry MADOFF (ed.), *Art School. Propositions for the 21st Century*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press 2009, pp. 27–32.

To serve society would have been to degrade himself.”⁶ The essential ambition, and indeed even obsession, was to seek the original and exemplary expression (as Kant would describe it) which ought to be found in the unique personality of the artist confronting an unfavorable, or at least problematic, social reality. And this including the academies, which from now on “could therefore not seem anything to him but work-house”⁷ for the artist. And despite inclusion and society’s understanding attitude, they began to be merely the mediator of the affirmation of individual artistic exclusivity, which holds true in a certain modified form to the present day.

The loss of the opportunity to decorate aristocratic and ecclesiastical houses had serious consequences for the contemporary art scenes. (Future) artists lost the prospect of financial security, and at the same time the academies, by virtue of the fact that the state had begun significantly to finance them, were accepting larger numbers of students. In consequence of this, as Pevsner points out, an ever-greater number of graduates had to struggle for the interest of a new target group, the bourgeoisie, which had a more changeable taste, was relatively unpredictable in its preferences and impatient when waiting for results, and in many cases had a far smaller volume of finance at its disposal. The state attempted to address this situation and began to offer support to those who produced “recognized”, “official”, and also “academic” art, above all genre scenes, landscapes, still lifes, and so forth. “But if their genius pushed them far towards the new and unwanted, they had to wait for enthusiastic patrons. A proletariat of artists, including hosts of mediocre men and some of the best, is typical of the 19th century.”⁸ And typical likewise is the (stereotyped) image of the needy artist creating genuine art in contrast to worthless academic works: with the latter one must associate the academy itself, which was synonymous with such production and with an art of considerable tedium.

Apart from losing demand from the aristocracy and the church, the economic status of artists was also negatively affected by new technologies and technical discoveries which enabled a far speedier production of (art)works. For example, with the advance of photography painters lost a considerable part of their living, and equally they lost the meaning of what they had been doing all their lives, since the effort of making a high-quality representation of reality had notably decreased in relevance.⁹ Not to speak of the new demands of the masses who were forming in urban agglomerates and who insisted upon their (popular) art, which aroused revulsion in many artists. As far as the academy was concerned, its relatively strong standing in the social context, which was based on pronounced support from the state, now faced a challenge that did not only come from the art scenes. A continually more vocal criticism was heard from those who had expected of the art schools that they would respond to technological innovations, changing modes of production, and alterations in the organization of work and in the life of society. Adding to the volume of this opposition were the voices of those overcome by the misery of the new age, rejecting progress and yearning for a return to traditional procedures and themes, and above all, to the crafts. At the turn of the twentieth century, right

6 Nikolaus PEVSNER, *Academies of Art: Past and Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1940) 2014, p. 240.

7 PEVSNER, *Academies*, p. 240.

8 PEVSNER, *Academies*, p. 223. The situation is analysed in detail by Arnold HAUSER, *The Social History of Art (vol.4)*, London – New York: Routledge 2005, pp. 110–144.

9 David NOVITZ, *The Boundaries of Art: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Place of Art in Everyday Life*, Christchurch: Cybernations 2001, pp. 40–46.

across Europe there were movements and societies of this character — Arts and Crafts, Jugendstil, Bloomsbury, de Stijl, Werkbund, and amidst them in particular Bauhaus.¹⁰ These made a striking impact on the tendency of artistic production and education. An ever-increasing experimentation began with new methods of tuition, especially in the field of applied arts and design, and the nature of these educational processes was notably defined by the attitude to mass production.¹¹ Some “old” academies attempted to transform themselves and respond to the challenges of the age, but equally there were entirely new art or arts and crafts schools emerging which abandoned certain received academic procedures, replacing them with more “practical” methods. However, that did not in any fundamental way influence the studio tuition in the purely artistic “free” disciplines; quite the contrary, its importance was still further reinforced and confirmed.

*The Birth of the Studio from the
Spirit of Romanticism*

Preceding the radical reform which academies across Europe underwent from the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was a fairly long period when academic educational procedures were being thought about and criticized. While one may find interesting insights as far back as Voltaire and Diderot and the Sturm und Drang movement, according to Pevsner the real reformers, those who made part of their ideas effective in reality, were Jacques Louis David in France and Amos Jacob Carstens in Germany. In translating romantic ideas into practice, however, a decisive part was played by the Nazarenes, the German conservative movement among whom Wilhelm Schadow was particularly influential.¹² This relatively unimportant painter may be identified as the key figure in the realization of the greatest innovation in 19th century art education, which is unquestionably the concept of studios - master classes (Meisterklassen). Without exaggeration one may state that this specific method of tuition (familiar in a certain form since the Middle Ages) is to this present day one of the most important power instruments for the formation of ideas about what should be the result of the activity that is designated as artistic.

The system of studio education is based on the almost exclusive authority of a teacher to whom students are entrusted, so that he/she may accompany them throughout their studies and help them to find the truth in themselves and try to articulate it. Practically without ceasing, they are spurred directly or indirectly to discover the spaces of their own inimitability and subsequently fashion those into an original representation. In the course of this creative and formative process, the rules of the world of art are revealed to them in detail, under the watchful and experienced eye of the head of the studio. The overseeing director never ceases to pursue these rules, in order that whatever the student creates may indeed have the character of an inimitable artefact in the context of production in the given local scene and in the artworld. However, one cannot regard heads of studio only as professionals who correct and point out what has already been done in

10 An impression is sometimes given, as Frank Whitford observes, that Bauhaus was the one and only radical school in this period, but this is not entirely based on truth. Cf. Frank WHITFORD, *Bauhaus*, Praha: Rubato 2015, pp. 33–36; Rainer K. WICK: “Remarks on the Reception of Bauhaus Pedagogy in Germany”, in: *Bauhaus Conceptual Model*, Hatje Cantz: Ostfildern 2009, pp. 343–346.

11 ELKINS, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, p. 31.

12 PEVSNER, *Academies*, pp. 192, 215.

the given field; they do not only give technological and technical comments or practical instructions. It is presupposed that they will also approach the intimate sphere in their student charges, making acquaintance with their inner lives and the themes which have resonance for them. Conversely, it is expected that the budding artists will be reciprocally accommodating, showing openness to pedagogic leadership, because only in this way will be able to work effectively towards realization of their genuine and unique artistic works.

Described in such terms, the process of studio tuition bears more resemblance to spiritual companionship in the style of St. Ignatius Loyola than to university education procedures. Further testimony to this is the fact that these procedures were introduced to the academies by members of the above-mentioned Nazarenes movement, noted for their asceticism and strict Catholicism. Admittedly, a broader intellectual justification is given by Immanuel Kant, according to whom the work, besides being original and exemplary, should contain something beyond comprehension, referring via symbolic expression to something supra-sensual, hence an element that cannot be adequately or exhaustively described and articulated.¹³ And precisely that sensibility for the “non-articulable” is what the student learns in the intimate moments of tutorship from his or her tutor. Because it is precisely this vertical dimension which gives the artwork justification and deeper meaning, hauling it out and isolating it from the everyday and making it supernatural. Equally, however, this mediating function of the artefact has its influence on the future artist, since it is supposed to be an instrument via which these links between heaven and earth will come into being. This idea, essentially very platonic,¹⁴ is the basis for the affirmation of the artist’s specific status as “a divine lightning-rod”, which he or she ought to believe in while at the academy, even if not a religious believer by conviction.

Taken as a whole, these ideas form a relatively complex and coherent doctrine, but one which has never had a clearly articulated form in all of its extent. It has not been explicitly formulated in any reasonably extensive work, setting out both the principles and the concrete practical directions in the manner of the *Spiritual Exercises*.¹⁵ Only fragmentary rationales have been given, by and large, for the educational procedures, recommendations or useful advice for tuition, or on occasion manifestos, where artistic purposes and pedagogic ambitions are mixed up together.¹⁶ Justifications of the method of teaching, or elucidations of procedures, typically remain on the level of appealing to the tradition of education in academies, which is in itself a guarantee of quality and somehow a self-evident and “natural” mode for the highest education in art. Needless to say, the romantic vocabulary, not to speak of the religious terminology of the Nazarenes, has gradually fallen into virtual oblivion, and the ideas that justify the preserved mode of education for artists endure as a sediment, unarticulated but constantly present, in thoughts about art education.

Master classes or studios may be identified as a relatively large exception in the entire system of university education, though this cannot be said about the individual approach as such. However, no similar sphere exists where such a personal engagement and investment of intimate life is expected for the achievement of study results, as is the case in art.

13 Immanuel KANT, *Kritika soudnosti* (Critique of Judgment), Praha: Odeon 1975, § 46, pp. 125–126.

14 PLATÓN, *Ión*, Praha: OIKOYMENH 2010, pp.79–93.

15 SV. IGNÁC Z LOYOLY, *Duchové cvičenia* (Spiritual Exercises), Bratislava: Dobrá kniha 2005.

16 Undoubtedly one may take this view of texts by Paul Klee, for example. Cf: Paul KLEE, *Pedagogický náčrtník* (Pedagogical Sketchbook), Praha: Triáda 2013.

In natural sciences, social sciences or the humanities, the student is not required to more or less thematize his or her intimate life, to articulate extremely private problems and transpose them either directly or mediately in the realization of artefacts. Furthermore, education in studios is distinct in this much also, that it is not supported by any professional bibliography which would help the student to meet the expectations of school and public.¹⁷ There are many instruction manuals and textbooks for acquiring a variety of craft skills; study plans for art are likewise laden with a weight of bibliography from the fields of art theory, philosophy, aesthetics, critical theory, cultural studies, and feminist writings. But books which would present and facilitate the process of art education, or even textbooks of art: absurd as it may sound, no such books are available. And doubtless it is questionable, given a teaching system so constructed, whether they would even be possible.

As regards freedom of self-expression, the nineteenth century academies, adapting their master classes as the highest level of education, underwent a number of changes which must always be kept in view, as their consequences may be identified to the present day. They created considerable space for freeing tuition from the strict rules and almost unvarying procedures so typical of academies in the Renaissance and especially the Baroque. The endless hours of drawing from plaster cast and live figure were restricted; drill began gradually to give way to the search for original expression and tradition surrendered a space to discretion¹⁸, and a continual emphasis on freedom came to the forefront. Teachers need no longer intervene directly in their charges' work process, merely supervise, consult, and offer space for the finding of the student's own artistic programme, theme, or problem. In this context any kind of hierarchy of genres lost its meaning; the future creative agents might choose any subject whatever, and gradually also, the style of its making. "It is true that the hierarchy of genres was breaking down and the classical ideal was becoming less convincing (...) ordinary landscapes and scenes from everyday life began to replace 'resurrected Romans'".¹⁹ What is important, however, is that this applied not only to students but also to teachers, who were continually becoming more different from one another and thus importing more plurality into the academies. Diversification of the focus of studios on the one hand brought a variety that had been lacking, but at the same time the intensifying competition between different approaches produced numerous conflicts, deriving precisely from the difference in artistic approach.

The art school milieu is considerably atomized to the present day, with the basic organizational units being studios or master classes. Almost every school groups them further into larger units, but in educational terms that has no great significance for the formation of students. In a system so articulated, the head of the studio acquires a privileged hierarchical standing. During past times the person in this position was normally designated as the *patron*, hence guardian and protector; the word is etymologically derived from the Latin word *pater*, "father".²⁰ Outside and within the academy, this person guarantees the artistic standard. He or she is the warranty that the future artists have

17 It differs fundamentally in this regard from psychoanalysis, where these processes are precisely described and incessantly recorded for their further improvement and supersession.

18 PEVSNER, *Academies*, pp. 224–238; Arthur EFLAND, *History of Art Education: Intellectual and Social Currents in Teaching the Visual Arts*, New York: Teachers College Press 1990, pp. 51–56.

19 Steve EDWARDS, "Introduction: Stories of modern art", in: Steve EDWARDS – Paul WOOD (eds.), *Art and Visual Culture 1850–2010: Modernity to Globalization*, London: TATE 2013.

20 EFLAND, *History of Art Education*, p. 52.

adequately appropriated the skills and acquired the knowledge to be able to create acceptable works of art. The name of the teacher is a guarantee of the quality of the students, but it also says something about the nature of their approach to the work and their mode of thinking. Willy-nilly these things follow them, at least to the extent that generally, all their lives long, they declare who they have studied with. The heads of studios would probably hate to say this, but they are the ones who turn out fully qualified artists based on this explicitly patriarchal model of formation.

All of the educational procedures described above, applied since the times of romanticism, lead with a certain inevitability to the creation of strictly individual work. The processes are all directed towards one single point, namely that the student shall fully develop his or her exclusively individual capacities and talent and shall freely choose the path of creative endeavor that he or she wishes to pursue. Old-fashioned though it may sound, according to Elkins the principle still applies that only under the guidance of the master can it be possible fully to develop the “individual genius” of the student, for whom ever-better conditions for individualization are constantly being created. “Contemporary teachers adhere to this in that they do not try to foist a uniform standard on each student they advise. Instead, they try to feel their way to an understanding of what each student is all about. Teachers acknowledge that everyone has different ideals, directions, talents and potentials. That sense of individuality is quintessentially Romantic.”²¹ To this one must add that art training of this kind always has its specifics of place: it conforms to local traditions, while the context of exceptionality is given by the conditions of the given art scene.

Teaching Avantgarde

In the course of the twentieth century also, some changes occurred in the functioning of the academies, and the confrontation with Bauhaus and reform schools similar to it may be considered one of the most important. In the final reckoning, this encounter helped not only to moderate the antagonism between academies and art scenes but even to make the academies an accepted part of the (avantgarde included) artworld. From the perspective of art education, perhaps the most important thing was that the academies became willing to have representatives of the avantgarde working on their territory. Amidst the walls of institutions that had dusty plaster copies of ancient statues mounted on their corridors, suddenly there appeared those very people who had staked their artistic identity on the radical questioning and demolition of what they had right in front of them. For them, after all, the academy and all connected with it was the principal enemy, representing opposition to the progressive artworld, a synonym of conservatism and not infrequently also bad taste. One need only recall Clement Greenberg and *The Avantgarde and Kitsch*, his celebrated text from the late 1930s, where in substance he branded everything academic as worthless, unoriginal, not even worthy of the name of art. “Self-evidently, all kitsch is academic; and conversely, all that’s academic is kitsch. For what is called the academic as such no longer has an independent existence, but has become the stuffed-shirt “front” for kitsch.”²²

21 ELKINS, *Why Art Cannot be Taught*, p. 30.

22 Clement GREENBERG, “The Avantgarde and Kitsch”. Online at: <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.htmlIn>

Greenberg was probably targeting academicism more than the actual schools, although there is surely no doubt which camp he thought those belonged to. When all is said and done, that would be in harmony with the initial premise of the avantgardes: radical negation of everything that may be designated as affirmative regarding any artistic tradition whatsoever. This despite the fact that, at the time when Greenberg wrote this text for *Partisan Review*, many representatives of the avantgardes were already working at the art schools, and hence they had become part of the criticized academic establishment. In Bauhaus also, which was born from the froth of the turbulent avantgarde sea, or at least of its more placid waters, many members of the avantgarde movement were working as teachers, including Johannes Itten, Kazimir Malevich, Paul Klee, László Moholy Nagy, Hannes Meyer and, last but not least, the first director Walter Gropius. All of them were incorporated into the contemporary institutional practice of education, and their attitudes towards it were by no means totally negative but had their affirmative features also. Needless to say, none of this changes the fact that every one of them strove to import their revolutionary attitudes into academic practice; they did this with varying intensity and with different attitudes to art education as it was then.

The fact that a rebellious group of artists became part of the system can scarcely be called surprising, given that similar about-turns had happened in the academies in past times also. The transition from the baroque mode of teaching to studio education was likewise a radical upheaval, accompanied also by personal repositionings.²³ In the case of the avantgarde, however, something entirely new occurred, something not previously present in the art schools, which conquered minds and dominated the atmosphere everywhere. Andreas Huyssen calls it “that sense of universal and hysterical negation”²⁴: radical divorce from everything that had hitherto been created and an attempt at building something fundamentally different. As viewed by the art schools, it was about complete severance from the past in all respects, including the appropriation of the basic skills and creative forms, which henceforward should be guided by entirely new procedures. One must emphasize, however, that beginning with Bauhaus itself, the academies never took radicalism to those lengths, and they retained a great deal even of traditional procedures for teaching, or they found inspiration in the past, especially the Middle Ages.²⁵ Ultimately, only a few of them really did abandon studio tuition, and after some time they either returned to it or replaced it with similar alternatives.

Despite the fact that, where educational procedures were concerned, the art schools were not thoroughgoing in their negation of the past, nonetheless the situation in the academies did change in certain respects after World War II, principally as regards the position of the new avantgarde teachers. These came to the academies to educate, an undertaking which involves the delivery of a sum of items of knowledge and skills amassed in the given artistic field. This element of tradition, which in other disciplines is balanced by the constant effort to stimulate a spirit of innovation, is nonetheless in sharp contrast to the ambition to deny everything preserved, in any form whatsoever, from times past.

23 PEVSNER, *Academies*, pp. 190–242.

24 Andreas HUYSEN, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1986, p. 26.

25 In the first years of Bauhaus even its director Walter Gropius was a partisan of the historicizing approach; counterposed to “usefulness and needs”, in the first place he put beauty, whose primal model should be the Gothic cathedral. Cf: Walter GROPIUS, “Manifesto at the Bauhaus”, in: Glenn ADAMSON, *The Craft Reader*, Oxford: BERG 2010, pp. 554–555.

But the paradox here is not only in the avantgarde having to establish a new tradition of denial as a teaching method; they also had to engraft this mode of thinking about one's own work onto their students. And the latter, if they were to be truly consistent (which happened only in exceptional cases), would have had to deny their own heads of studio with equal radicalism, to dissociate themselves from them completely and pursue their own course. This new element had been absent in the Renaissance and Baroque academies, which were so constituted that in fact no such situation could occur: education of students was based on a thorough transmission of skills, during which denial was not countenanced in the relationship with teachers, nor indeed was it expected. Even in the nineteenth century studio tuition, though it was considerably individualized, was definitely built more on transmission of tradition than on its essential negation. Graduates of master classes continued in the creative line of their tutors, and although they disengaged from them visually and intellectually, this did not imply fundamentally rejecting them or calling them into question. With the avantgarde teachers' corps the eventual state of affairs was much the same, as it happens, but unquestionably the alignment was diametrically different in these two instances.

In the overwhelming majority of cases, avantgarde artists who began to teach at the art schools did not manage entirely "to squeeze out" those colleagues of theirs who followed exclusively traditional art procedures and for this purpose used traditional media. That has not changed even in the present-day situation, and both groups continue to work alongside each other in the art schools, having learned to coexist using the studio model of tuition or some modified form of it. Even though two totally different worlds and approaches to the artistic comprehension of reality are involved here, they have managed to exist side by side for several decades. By doing so they create the impression that in the art academies currently it is permissible and possible to produce anything whatsoever, without limitations of theme, style or content. This becomes still more plausible when students embarking on projects are able freely to choose their media and techniques by their own judgment, irrespective of what they have appropriated from present or past, whether they are committing themselves to the avantgarde route or the traditional route, or some combination of both approaches.

Alongside institutional changes in the teaching process, from today's perspective we may regard it as crucial that, together with the employment of the avantgarde, an essential shift occurred in the comprehension of the artwork, and this had a many-sided impact afterwards on teaching at the academies. Probably the difference is best highlighted when we look more closely at the situation directly after the extinction of the historical avantgardes, or what Peter Bürger calls the post-avantgarde. "We characterize that phase by saying that it revived the category of the work and that the procedures invented by the avant-garde with antiartistic intent are being used for artistic ends."²⁶ Artistic denial, which originally was supposed to replace the artwork, became part of legitimate art procedures: this followed from the fact that the procedures hitherto pertaining were now incorporating provocations and attempts to call the artworld into question. Therefore, students at many contemporary academies make acquaintance with the latter and appropriate them. In other words, the object of criticism and its instrument found themselves in the same boat, and according to Bürger this further reinforced the autonomy of this area and "an institution continues to survive as something separate from the praxis of

26 BÜRGER, *Theories of the Avant-Garde*, p. 57.

life”.²⁷ In a fundamental way, the art schools conserve this practice and contribute to its reproduction and to deciding its acceptance or denial.

Bürger regards this situation as unambiguously a defeat for the historical avantgardes, who were thus unable to erase the boundary between life and art. Needless to say, that does not mean that no further projects aimed against institutional practices were carried out. Quite the contrary, criticism of them has become sharper, and because it is diversifying, it hits many targets more precisely than in the past. The question is whether anyone still really takes it seriously, whether it involves any more than an empty ritual in which everything that matters has already been said. Likewise, an ever-greater number of problems which are closer to everyday life, touching not only on social but also environmental, ethical, and workers’ rights issues, are becoming subjects for artistic response. Hence to a certain extent one may dispute even Bürger’s statement that “neo-avant-gardiste art is autonomous art in the full sense of the term (...)”, while “the efforts to sublimate art become artistic manifestations that, despite their producers’ intentions, take on the character of works”.²⁸ That is to say, the artwork has not vanished: it has merely changed its degree of extension, firstly with a dimension which was originally all about its rejection, but also with further strategies aiming beyond art, in the direction of our everyday life.

*Academies Without Studios and Without
(Individualistic) Artworks?*

Undoubtedly it makes sense to argue with Bürger about where the boundaries of the artwork are and how one is to think about it in a variety of participative and community projects, particularly in terms of isolation from social context and also as regards openness to unexpected interventions on the part of an unpredictable audience.²⁹ However, when analyzing the nature of education in contemporary academies, hence institutions focusing primarily on preparation of students for creating artefacts, the key factor is precisely what the diversification of approaches brought about by the historical avantgardes has to offer for teaching, in the light of current social challenges. Or to put it in different words, to what extent are contemporary avantgarde approaches to the creation of the work (not to speak of traditional approaches) really able to grasp and adequately respond to today’s social, political and environmental themes? Following on from this, one must ask whether contemporary “avantgardes”, whose identity is still formed in part by an antagonistic relation to popular culture, are capable of meaningfully and comprehensibly articulating serious problems of everyday life that affect the general public, and at the same time teaching the oncoming generation of artists to do this?

In such contexts it seems important to return to the concept of negation, because this is precisely the core of the avantgarde “discourse” in the academies and also beyond them. John Roberts tries both to defend it and to articulate it freshly, because he considers it fundamental for the purpose of preserving the critical function of art and hence its identity:

[N]egation in art is what of necessity mediates skill (or lack of skill),

27 BÜRGER, *Theories of the Avant-Garde*, p. 57.

28 BÜRGER, *Theories of the Avant-Garde*, p. 58.

29 See: Erika FISCHER-LICHTE, *Estetika performativity* (Aesthetics of Performativity), Mníšek pod Brdy: Na konári 2011, pp. 51–106.

form and meaning. And what drives this negation is the very “asociality” of art under capitalism, the fact that for art to remain art (rather than transform itself into design, fashion or social theory) it must experience itself as being “out of joint” with its place in the world and within its own traditions.³⁰

Roberts points out, however, that the attempt to create something new and the desire to demarcate oneself vis-à-vis tradition is not to be understood in a modernist spirit as a desire for progress and betterment, or in a nihilistic sense as destruction. “Rather, the “new” here is the restless, *ever vigilant positioning* of art’s critical relationship to its own traditions of intellectual and cultural formation and administration.”³¹

That there is something meaningful in “negation”, “critical relationship”, and experiencing oneself as “out of joint” in one’s response to serious themes and problems of present-day society — one surely cannot doubt this, though account must also be taken of circumstances, context and goals. It may be disputed, however, whether such an apparatus of concepts can truly suffice in the realization of participative or community projects, where one needs an accommodating attitude, a comprehension of the communal, and to borrow a phrase from Jacques Derrida, a politics of friendship.³² In response to the ecological crisis it would seem more important, rather than individualistic demarcation of oneself as “outside” society, to seek methods of arousing awareness about the threats and having a communal experience “inside”. Not to mention the fact that a critical response by a group basing itself on community support can have a much greater impact than individual outcries, which not infrequently are driven more by a desire to be seen than by any effort at a real solution of the problem. This means that an affirmative attitude towards what is comprehensible and shared need not necessarily be synonymous with submission, resignation, or indeed (*pace* Greenberg) an absence of artistic quality; on the contrary, it may be a critical path with real scope.

Negation is inherently a component part of avantgarde procedures, and it is mainly in those that this principle is unambiguously dominant in the art academies — though within the limits set out above. In the true spirit of the avantgardes, the teacher should teach students to radically deny what the world of art has produced hitherto, including the teacher’s own work. No such thing happens for the most part, and it seems scarcely possible to overcome this paradox of the teaching avantgarde merely by bringing negation, solitariness, overview, and “objective” detachment still more into the foreground. Against the exaggerated stress on disinterestedness which lies in the background of such procedures, Arnold Berleant attempts to offer a different idea of aesthetics. For him the organizing principles are engagement and aesthetic experience based on involvement and participation, where reciprocity occurs between the one perceiving and the object: “The notion of experiential unity is central here, for art does not consist of objects but of situations in which experiences occur. The unified field of interactive forces involves perceivers, objects or events, creative initiatives, and some kind of performance or activation.”³³ One must emphasize that what Berleant has in mind is engagement with any artefacts,

30 John ROBERTS, *Revolutionary Times and the Avant-Garde*, London – New York: Verso 2015, p. 52.

31 ROBERTS, *Revolutionary Times*, p. 54.

32 Jacques DERRIDA, *The Politics of Friendship*, London – New York: Verso 2006.

33 Arnold BERLEANT, *Art and Engagement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1991, p. 49.

past or present, and so there is no reason why such thinking should not also apply to the process of their creation.

Stale ideas of detachment based on “dualist mythologies of objectivity”³⁴, which incidentally are targets of many modern critical art projects, are not the only modernist stereotypes present in academic art education. Assuredly one may also add the antipathy, or indeed “anxiety of contamination”³⁵, towards everything that is in some way connected with popular culture. Even some slight hint of an effort at catching the attention of the larger public is suspect, and an unacceptable compromise that necessarily lowers the quality of the genuine artwork. Not to speak of any attempt to convey contents other than intellectual, or indeed an ambition to have an effect on some group on the emotional level. Despite the proclaimed openness and freedom, such efforts are typically greeted by reaching for labels such as “sentimental”, “pathetic”, or even “kitschy”. Instead of leading towards complex work with a diverse scale of procedures and encouraging the use of a variety of symbolic forms, the art schools do not cease to cultivate an indiscriminate and often also banal criticism of popular culture. Universal rejection and contempt of all mass phenomena is probably simpler than shared, reflective work using instruments and means employed in popular culture, so that criticism may be articulated with the potential of a real impact on the public. Not to mention that this method of transmitting emancipatory contents need not necessarily mean capitulating to neoliberalism; quite the contrary, it may be a sophisticated destruction of neoliberal logic.

A greater openness to the social, however, might disturb the foundations of studio tuition, whose constitutive element is the conducting of students towards isolation from society and concentration on the quest for their own originality. Necessarily, individualistic work stands at the end of such a process, irrespective of whether the artefact is made by traditional or avantgarde procedures. And that is what gives its problematic character to this model of teaching art, even aside from its marked patriarchal character, which furthermore is inherently exclusive. Some art schools have abandoned the master classes to this extent, that they are no longer led by a single teacher but by a group of experts from various disciplines, and undoubtedly one may see that as a shift. But it does not in any way change the substance of this type of art education. Obsession with originality, and the associated effort to produce an artefact attributed to the individual, is the core meaning of the studio type of teaching, even with a collective leadership. And the regular exhibitions of students’ works are, addressed to the public, a stamp affirming the quality of this reiterated practice.

Probably no fundamental change will occur in the present-day academies until they are opened to the public. Introduction of elementary transparency in the educational processes normally brings democratization with it in any field, whether scholarly or social. That would probably also apply in the teaching of art disciplines, although undoubtedly it would be a painful blow to the academies to make them unveil their mysteries and subject their procedures and methods to public scrutiny. Teachers would have to describe how they actually educate, and what specifically goes into the formation of their successors. The light which would thus penetrate to their cabinets and studios would probably deprive some of them of authority; others, by contrast, would acquire a stronger position, and for many their status would remain untouched. It is not inconceivable that the

34 BERLEANT, *Art and Engagement*, p. 48.

35 HUYSEN, *After the Great Divide*, p. ix.

spotlighting of originality might not be accompanied by never-ending confessions and revelations of traumas (often fabricated, or at the very least overblown); it is not impossible that the consultations might not be of the nature of (amateur) counselling sessions. Interventions in intimate life might have their legitimation, and perhaps even rules; they might not be patriarchally arbitrary and a vicarious right, extorted whether by explicit or subtly manipulative techniques. And perhaps this enforced seeking and disclosing of one's own suffering "I" could be replaced by group works, where attention would shift from the individual search for expression to collective testimony, from originality and innovative ability to relevance for the given (school) community, and from fetishization of the quality of the work to aesthetic experience.

In the contemporary "post-avantgarde" situation many of the questions posed above remain unanswered, and they represent a challenge for the contemporary academies, which will have to deal with them if they wish to remain relevant institutions. To find oneself in isolation is not difficult, and it would not be the first time in history when the art schools took up an oppositional position not only with regard to society, but even vis-à-vis the local art scenes, or indeed the global world of art. The most problematic part of all in the current system is studio tuition (in whatever form, and with all that it represents), which is not infrequently treated as the natural form of academic art education. To create an alternative which would be inclusive and could conceive of traditional or avantgarde procedures, while at the same time being open to the creation of collective, participative or environmental projects, undoubtedly is a major challenge. What appears fundamental here is a turning away from obsession with the search for individual expression, often accompanied by fantasies of making a major impact, which for the majority of artists brings nothing except frustrations. Just as the master classes opened the eyes of students to look inwards, towards their own "I" and in search of originality, the new educational methods should presumably turn their vision in precisely the opposite direction.