

Notes toward a Radical, Critical Public Pedagogy

A report from
the Think Tank that has yet to be named
Department of Tactical Education

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IT IS WORTHWHILE TO ASK and consider, as I attempt in the following pages, what do education and dialogic practices have to offer artistic and activist communities? Is there anything to gain by attempting to collapse, or perhaps intersect, the three disciplines of art, activism, and education? In what way might we provide a new framework for learning, dissent, and critical artistic engagement beyond the traditional spaces of art and into the public sphere? Ultimately, how might a more complicated engagement in these discourses contribute our continual struggle?

PUBLIC PEDAGOGY

The knowledge and direction that we consume inform how we operate as citizens in various ways, both in typical forms of education (i.e. school) as well as various other media that surround us in our daily lives. Theorist Henry Giroux has offered a helpful term to encapsulate this vast public reservoir of calculated ideology, propaganda, and often, control—one he calls “public pedagogy”.¹ Included in Giroux’s

public pedagogy are TV, movies, advertisements and news programs like CNN or FOX News—most of which, he postulates, contribute to the pedagogy of neoliberalism. Defining public pedagogy, Giroux states:

“Public pedagogies...bridge the gap between private and public discourses, while simultaneously putting into play particular ideologies and values that resonate with broader public conversations regarding how society views itself and the world of power, events, and politics.”²

Also included in this public pedagogy are cultural producers. Giroux never directly addresses the artist as participating in this sphere, instead primarily focusing on cultural studies programs in the University. I want to pick up on this idea in order to help provide the artist, activist, and more broadly the cultural producer, with a model to consider his/her work as being, at least in part, inherently educational.

¹ Henry Giroux. “Cultural Studies in Dark Times: Public Pedagogy and the Challenge of Neoliberalism”. http://henryagiroux.com/online_articles/DarkTimes.htm

² Henry Giroux. “Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: Fight Club, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence”.

http://www.henryagiroux.com/online_articles/fight_club.htm

Artistic and creative production hold pedagogical qualities, if for no other reason, because they contribute to a public pedagogy. This is important because within the sphere where creative practices are often located are a variety of ideologies and pedagogies, most of which ultimately contribute to the dominant order's oppression, control, silencing, and alienation of the [oppressed] individual and collective alike. With this broader concept of how education can function as a public pedagogy, I would like to explore how the artist/activist can operate with more cognizance of his/her work contributing to the already present realm of ideas (most notably the mass media) that slyly and often deviously inform our beliefs, desires, and understanding of the world around us. Equally as important, the artist/activist should remain aware of his/her work as a combative production of information, one that can directly intervene in the dominating public pedagogies by slowly permeating into the realm of ideas that already exist in the world.

“SILENCING” IN THE PUBLIC REALM

“Without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance.”³

-Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*

Before I go further into the role of the artist as a kind of interventionist oppositional public educator, it is necessary to briefly address the conditions of a public realm in which we, as citizens, consumers, and individuals have

been immersed. Important to a theory of radical, critical public pedagogy[s] is an understanding of the realm in which those pedagogies operate and function, as well as why it is essential to maintain and work toward creating more autonomous and egalitarian spaces within the public realm.

In her work *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt articulates that within the public realm the political realm is located; and this is where, as individuals, we fulfill our political agency and can affect a broader society. In order for us to be influential in our society as political bodies, it is necessary for us to be seen and heard [by others], or “to make an appearance”⁴ in the public realm. By participating in the public realm, we can potentially affect our reality. Which is also to say, that it is necessary for us to be understood, seen, and heard by others for our “reality” to be affirmed. It is necessary that our private⁵ needs, desires, anguishes, etc. are not suppressed—when they are, we have no persuasion in the public realm that directly affects both our public and private worlds. For example, if no one knows about the suffering of a group of peoples, in a sense, it doesn't exist. This is why we must have a voice, and more specifically must be seen and heard, in the public realm. Arendt explains further:

“For us, appearance [in the public realm]—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from

4 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. pg. 50

5 Here, by private I do not necessarily mean individual. Rather “private” due to the fact that it is not affirmed publicly by being seen or heard by others.

being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearances.”⁶

To speak more plainly, what is at stake here is our individual, as well as collective, political presence and agency in the world that directly affects and dictates many material aspects of our daily lives. It perhaps is not a new or surprising thought that our voices are ignored and needs disregarded. But being ignored or disregarded acknowledges a recognition [from the oppressor], even if it is dismissed in favor of other interests. What I am attempting to argue is that our lives are increasingly being suppressed to such a degree that we are no longer just ignored, but are not heard or seen. What I hope to establish is a new way to consider our presence as cultural producers in the public sphere. And to go a bit further in stating that without an appearance in the public realm we are not only disregarded in the political social policy that shapes our society, but we, as individuals, are being pushed to the periphery of the public realms to such a degree that we are being driven to the exterior of our own “reality.” For example, as our desires continue to be ignored and suppressed, our society, institutions, spaces, etc. are constructed *for us* with primary interest in capital accumulation or cultural hegemony. This control of the public realm, in affect, constructs our

6 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. pg. 50

reality for us, diminishing a sector of the public sphere in which we have the ability to learn, dissent, or practice non-mediated lives. This affects our individual and collective lives both publicly and privately, producing dire effects—the most obvious is that we are being repressed and pushed aside in favor of market driven forces, and this diminishing of our space and voice(s) leaves us with a complete disregard for our needs as well as an even more complicated situation regarding strategies for dissent. If we do not have a presence in the public realm, or if we are not seen and heard by others (politically speaking by our government), it is as though we do not exist as political bodies. This also means that our individual and collective voices as well as alternative (to market-driven) spaces are being abolished, which leads to a silencing of alternative opinions, non-manipulated inquiry, and alternative political philosophies and discussions.

ALIENATION AND THE SPECTACLE

“...In order to dominate, the dominator has no choice but to deny true praxis to people, deny them their right to say their own word and think their own thoughts. He cannot act dialogically; for him, to do so would mean that he either relinquished his power to dominate and joined the cause of the oppressed, or that he had lost the power through miscalculation.”⁷

- Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

7 Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. pg. 121
<http://www.marxists.org/subject/education/freire/pedagogy/index.htm>

3 Hannah Arendt. *Past, Present, and Future*. pg. 149

In this early stage of a rather daunting study, it appears that the diminishing of the individual in the public realm is result to a variety of political policies, theories, as well as capitalistic tendencies and ideologies such as neoliberalism, relentless bare knuckle advertising, cooptation of culture, and the commodification of desire that have been implemented and seemingly perfected over the past fifty or so years to a near unimaginable degree. I, perhaps problematically, will not attempt to tackle the enormity of implications imbedded in the sentence prior to this one, as many other thinkers are much better equipped to do so;⁸ but I bring this up to suggest that what has brought us to such a dire situation is the culmination of incredibly powerful mechanisms of capitalism, spectacle, militarism, and economically-driven tendencies. These mechanisms have developed to such a degree that most of us are not able to understand the forces that persuade and inform our consumption, relationships, and political realms. For most of us, the various tentacles of capitalism, corporate power, and our present political situation are indistinguishable. Instead it becomes an overwhelming and domineering abstract force that we, or at least I, are predominantly at a loss when it comes to both understanding our situation and historical place in the world as well as a strategy of opposition.

Various philosophers, many of whom inform this text, have worked to-

ward articulating a similar theory of a capitalistic and hegemonic driven domination; as well as an alienation of the citizen by way of manipulation of public opinion. These capitalist ideologies persuade and manipulate the consumer, denying a true voice of the citizen. Political participation should ideally be a dialogue about our political and societal desires, both individual and collective. My intent here is not to subscribe to or promote a particular meta-theory about our current condition; it does however seem necessary to at least take steps toward gaining a working knowledge of a large aspect of our contemporary condition and historical moment in order to map out some possibilities for resistance and negation.

“The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.”⁹

-Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

“The distinguishing feature of advanced industrial society is its effective suffocation of those needs which demand liberation—liberation also from that which is tolerable and rewarding and comfortable—while it sustains and absolves the destructive power and repressive function of affluent society.”¹⁰

-Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*

In beginning an understanding of a very tangled, messy, and opaque political and market-driven world we live under, one place one may look

9 Guy Debord. *Society of the Spectacle*. no. 1, pg. 7 http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/pub_contents/4
10 Herbert Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man*. pg. 7 <http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/64onedim/odmcontents.html>

toward is Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*. While I’m unconvinced that Debord offers a foolproof theoretically sound explanation of our contemporary world (or even a completely coherent one), I do believe he offers us some insight and some clarification in beginning to disentangle our difficult situation. In *Spectacle* Debord begins to unpack the convergence of a profoundly pervasive consumerism and mass media as part of an advanced capitalism that manipulates our lives all the way down to our deepest most basic desires. For our purposes, Debord articulates a total suppression and manipulation of these desires, as well as a mediation of our relationships to one another due to the spectacle and consumerism. I’ll borrow Debord’s terminology here for the purposes of speaking more succinctly about the large and various apparatuses that contribute to a very hard to theorize society.

Echoing Debord’s concerns, Marcuse articulates a suppression of the individual by dominant political forces and industrialization. While Marcuse emphasizes technology and industrialization, the problems with mass media and consumption are also part of his analysis of contemporary society. Through Debord and Marcuse I’m attempting to draw out the idea that the spectacle and advanced capitalism has affectively altered and manipulated our desires, and therefore, in a sense, our reality. Marcuse explains:

“‘False’ [needs] are those which are imposed upon the individual by particular social interest in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggress-

siveness, misery and injustice [...] The result then, is euphoria in unhappiness. The most prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs.”¹¹

This seems true enough, most of us can identify with the empty desires that we all have. Our desire for useless objects, gadgets, and particular brands are something we all deal with. But what Debord and Marcuse were beginning to articulate is a cognizant and purposeful manipulation of these (our) desires for profit and control, and the effect of this manipulation extends to such a degree that it is affecting our lives more than one could imagine. Marcuse goes further in explaining his theory of a one-dimensional society:

“...the products indoctrinate and manipulate; and promote a false consciousness which is immune to its falsehood. And as these beneficial products become available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life—much better than before—and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe...”¹²

A result of this manipulation of desire and one-dimensional thought and behavior is the suffocation of our political agency and space for exploration of alternative political philosophies. In short, Capitalism is a political ideal-

11 Herbert Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man*. pg. 5
12 Herbert Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man*. pg. 12

8 David Harvey on Neoliberalism & Postmodernity, Guy Debord on the “spectacle”, Stephen Duncombe on Cultural Resistance/Cooptation of culture. To name a few

ogy operating in the public sphere that manifests in many oppressive material realities, and I am attempting to connect the dots between capitalism as a pedagogy that informs/indoctrinates us, that is in bed with consumerism, the mass media, and other public pedagogies—acting as a tool for political and social repression.

Along with the manipulation of our desires, one way in which this control happens, as I have already suggested, is through the mainstream media's politically myopic reporting on various issues that pertain to our lives. This is one way in which public pedagogies function to control and indoctrinate the masses, not unlike Marcuse's "one-dimensional thought and behavior." Part of our indoctrination is the top-down messaging that capitalism, conservatism, and militarism is good and safe, and America has the freest political system possible. What various outlets and distributors of information falsely confirm is that we are *not* being exploited by our bosses and politicians, we really *do* need Hummers in the city, immigrants are stealing all our jobs, or that if you just work a little harder, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, you'll make it. And while one might complain about taxes, the war, or political corruption, the mass media has successfully diverted any discussion of the entanglement between these issues with capitalism and corporate power.

Also at issue here is the one-way, top-down conversation that happens at the level of national and international media as well as with our political representation. With the elevation of our political system and politicians to

a seemingly untouchable symbol(s) it becomes a system of control and mystical shadowy groups assuring us they are doing what needs to be done to protect our interests and our lives. Rather than having representation by a peer, what was conceived originally as an assembled group of citizen-leaders in conversation with other citizens, listening to their (our) needs, and altering policy accordingly,¹³ has become an anti-dialogical machine in which one's voice is only heard if he/she has money or power to buy a microphone, and a politico-capitalist machine that indoctrinates rather than listens and converses. To engage in a real and sincere two-way dialogue¹⁴ with the oppressed would suggest a relinquishing of power, as well as admittance into the public realm as a political body. The "town-hall" meeting and other forums that suggest a conversation between the common-person and the politician are a completely performative gesture, ultimately useless and empty, symbolically suggesting that we, as citizens and individuals, are in fact being seen, heard, listened to. The thick façade that is our 24-hour political news coverage reinforces to us that we indeed have a voice. Still, the fact remains that no matter how many e-mails and text messages CNN or Bill O'Reilly read on-air, attempting to

13 Here I am NOT suggesting that this was ever the case with elected leaders, or that capitalism was at one time an economic / political system or philosophy that allowed all people to flourish and live freely. Instead I'm attempting to clarify that with our current condition our political agency is suffocated by the abolishment of any two-way dialogue in which our leaders *hear and listen* what we, as citizens, need or desire.

14 As opposed to a symbolic but ultimately useless "town-hall" political type dialogue as we have seen emphasized in the recent election.

signify that they, the news media, are in touch with the individual and common citizen, our voices are primarily used and manipulated purposefully by an extremely one-dimensional perpetuates the dominant ideology of capital. Just as they edit the content of their programming, they edit the 'voices' that are artificially heard.

In the wake of our being silenced, one of the most important things we must work toward is the re-establishment of our public presence in order to perpetuate ideas that work against the dominant public pedagogies that lead to oppression on various fronts. As critical peoples, we must [re]establish spaces for praxis developed and sustained outside the stranglehold of the spectacle and capitalist public pedagogy and with awareness of our own "false consciousness."

Our current condition has left us with a total domination and repression of our spaces for dialogical exchange in favor of oppressive forms and market driven interests. The result is the loss of both our physical spaces, like non-profit sites of learning, as well as our space in the political [public] realm that we, as a "democratic" society, are supposed to be guaranteed. This essay is an attempt, among other things, to articulate how we can use our artistic practices more pedagogically and politically as an occupier of space, which over time can amount to a substantial presence in the political realm if we maintain patience and insistence on rigorous and sustained praxis.¹⁵

15 Paulo Freire's definition: Action + Reflection = Praxis. See *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

WHAT DO CREATIVE PROJECTS HAVE TO OFFER?

Whether or not specific creative or activist practices adopt the typical language or rhetoric of educational methodology, it puts information, ideas, theories, philosophies, etc. out into the public sphere. This information, put forth by cultural producers, exists in the world with more mainstream and popular knowledge, propaganda, and oppressive ideologies. This co-existence, I believe, is both exciting and daunting because it provides a potential site of contestation and intervention. It is important for us as artists and activists to recognize and embrace this coexistence in order to better create and disseminate material we find important, as well as offer an alternative to the dominant pedagogy we are force-fed by advertisements, corporate news outlets, and venues of mainstream entertainment. Giroux, in discussing the moral and political implications of pedagogy, attempts to articulate how pedagogy can operate as a combative political force:

"As a political practice, pedagogy is viewed as an outgrowth of struggles and illuminates the relationships among power, knowledge, and ideology, while self-consciously, if not self-critically, recognizing the role it plays as a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within particular sets of social relations. As a moral practice, pedagogy recognizes that what cultural workers, artists, activists, media workers, and others teach cannot be abstracted from what it means to invest in public life, presuppose some notion of the future, or locate oneself in a public discourse. The moral implications of pedagogy

also suggest that our responsibility as intellectuals for the public cannot be separated from the consequences of the knowledge we produce, the social relations we legitimate, and the ideologies and identities we offer up to students as well as colleagues.”¹⁶

Because I am interested in the public sphere of knowledge and public pedagogy as a site of contestation, one might assume I am suggesting an extremely public intervention, or a kind of culture jamming or détournement of the spectacle—practices like those of the Yes Men¹⁷ or the Biotic Baking Brigade¹⁸ may come to mind. While there is value to the interventions that the Yes Men and others are impressively able to pull off, they remain less dialogical and reflexive and are not my focus here, nor is fetishizing the mainstream media as a site of resistance. The other type of practice that one might assume I’m endorsing is what, in the art world, has come to be known as “relational aesthetics”.¹⁹ While many projects that are often referred to as relational aesthetics projects often encourage conversation, many often seem less interested in pedagogy, inquiry, and praxis engaged in resistance, and more interested in the momentary creation of space for conversation. Take, for example Rirkrit Tiravanija’s project in which he cooked dinner for guests at a New York gallery. All in attendance engaged with strangers and new friends, sharing

16 Henry Giroux. “Cultural Studies in Dark Times: Public Pedagogy and the Challenge of Neoliberalism” http://www.henrygiroux.com/online_articles/DarkTimes.htm

17 <http://www.theyesmen.org>

18 For more on BBB see *Pie Any Means Necessary: The Biotic Baking Brigade Cookbook*

19 See Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*

conversation and the meal provided. The implication here is that conversation is inherently democratic and valuable, therefore somehow political. In my view, this is not necessarily true, and more importantly it is not a sustained conversation that engages in a continual study of what is to be done. In many ways both types of practices are informative, but I want to distance this essay from these types of projects that are less dialogical (Yes Men), or more concerned with the momentary space for conversation (Tiravanija), and encourage practices that engage in a horizontal sustained dialogue and perpetuate values of egalitarianism and work toward “unveiling reality”.²⁰ The idea here is to create spaces, ideas, dialogues, and discourses that exist outside capital and its supporting structures, where radical content can be produced without mediation, co-optation, filtering, and “false consciousness.” The questions important to explore under this framework: How do we promote egalitarian ideas in the public sphere while working against more dominant ideologies and various forms of oppression? How can we do this in a way that is rooted in a sustained dialogue? Can it function as a grassroots project? How can we build alliances with like-minded and oppressed individuals to better learn and expand our thoughts? And finally, how do we extend this dialogue to a broader audience while maintaining an existence outside co-opting forces?

My insistence on a sustained dialogical

20 “[unveiling reality] strives for the *emergence* of consciousness and *critical intervention* in reality.” Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. pg 68

praxis is informed by Freire’s convincing defense of the importance of exchange based on mutual respect, love, and moving forward while learning, growing, and engaging in a continual praxis. For Freire, if true dialogue and praxis isn’t integral to any social movement, then the oppressed will continue to be objectified and therefore dehumanized. Freire’s relevance to us, (yes—us, as artists, activists, etc.!) in this historical moment as well as to this particular essay, is his insight on the role that pedagogy plays in a social movement. For our purposes, education—or in this case a sincere, dialogical, radical public pedagogy and communal praxis—remains crucial in inciting not only some form of social movement, but education or public pedagogy that is essential in unveiling reality. This unveiling can help to nurture critical, active, egalitarian communities that work toward making both a greater appearance in the public realm while simultaneously maintaining a sustained inquiry and discourse. Both (can) lead to a process of critical reflection and conscious engagement with one’s surroundings. If we accept that creative projects have an educational value—by way of Giroux’s definition of public pedagogy—then it is a short step to recognize this pedagogical value and to consciously utilize it in our creative endeavors in beginning to build informed counter-publics invested in praxis and ideas of egalitarianism. If these communities continue to be in dialogue with one another, networking with other independent radical projects and peoples, perhaps we will find ourselves

building our own radical, politically relevant public, helping to make visible the true needs and desires that have become overshadowed by a contemporary capitalistic society.

