

Nora Sternfeld

Unglamorous Tasks: What Can Education Learn from its Political Traditions?

01/12

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In the inaugural issue of *e-flux journal*, Irit Rogoff, under the deliberately ironic title “Turning,” calls attention to the recent “educational turn in curating,” thereby marking important shifts in the understanding of both practices: curating is no longer understood as the mere mounting of exhibitions; education is no longer understood as the transmission of existing values and acquirements.¹ Thus we are dealing with a turn in two arenas, the curatorial and the educational.

By saying this I want to emphasize that the important move in Rogoff’s text does not consist in simply connecting the two, curating and educating – which would be a rather traditional enterprise, as the modern museum since the French Revolution has always seen itself as an educational institution. Traditionally, in addition to collecting, preserving, and researching, the tasks of representing and mediating were understood precisely as educational tasks of the museum. Moreover, the educational aspect of the museum – we owe these ideas to the reflexive turn of the New Museology – has first and foremost been a technique of power, aimed at absorbing and internalizing bourgeois values.² But I understand Rogoff’s point to be a different one. For her, education is not about handing down existing national and bourgeois values, as Tony Bennett would have it, nor about the mere reproduction of knowledge, but about exploring the possibilities of an alternative production of knowledge that resists, supplements, thwarts, undercuts, or challenges traditional forms of knowledge.

In this text I want to examine the traditional tasks of education as well as the possibility of thinking about the educational as something that overcomes the function of *reproducing* knowledge and becomes something else – something unpredictable and open to the possibility of a knowledge production that, in tones strident or subtle, would work to challenge the apparatus of value-coding. Our challenge is to imagine a form of education that would demand learners take a political stand, but without anticipating what that stand should be and thus effecting closure (in other words, always leaving an open space for other possibilities). Such an undertaking may provide, as we will see in this brief argument, further insight into our educational and curatorial practices, which are often quite tedious and not always glamorous.

1. THE DIALECTIC OF TAKING SIDES – RETHINKING THE TRADITIONS OF POLITICAL EDUCATION

Politicization

In order to arrive at such a deconstructive

concept of education I would like to begin with the histories of its politicization within twentieth-century modernity. In fact, the movement to politicize pedagogy started in the 1930s, when artists of the Left started to appropriate educational techniques and turn them towards progressive tasks within their practice. Follow me to a theater in the Berlin of the Weimar Republic and a scene of Bertolt Brecht's play *The Mother*. Onstage is a teacher in the middle of his own bourgeois living room, standing before a blackboard.³ A group of workers sits around a table, challenging the teacher in a debate about learning:

TEACHER (*before a blackboard*): All right, you want to learn to read. I cannot understand why you need it, in your situation; you are also rather old. But I will try, just as a favor for Mrs. Vlassova. Have you all something to write with? All right then, I will now write three easy words here: "Branch, nest, fish." I repeat: "Branch, nest, fish." (*He writes.*)

THE MOTHER (*who sits at the table with three others*): Must it really be "Branch, nest, fish"? Because we are old people we

have to learn the words we need quickly!

TEACHER (*smiles*): I beg your pardon; but the reason you may have for learning to read is a matter of total indifference.

THE MOTHER: Why should it be? Tell me, for instance, how do you write the word "Worker"? That will be of interest to our Pavel Sostakovich.

SOSTAKOVICH: Who needs to know how to write "Branch"?

THE MOTHER: He is a metal worker.

TEACHER: But you will need the letters in the word.

WORKER: But the letters in the words "Class Struggle" are needed too!

TEACHER: Possibly; but we must begin with the simplest things and not at once with the hardest! "Branch" is simple.

SOSTAKOVICH: "Class Struggle" is much more simple.⁴

02/12



The Mother, Bertolt Brecht after Maxim Gorki, Scene 6, Berliner Ensemble im Deutschen Theater, Berlin 1951. Photo: Abraham Pisarek.

At the end of the scene the blackboard shows the words: "WORKERS. CLASS STRUGGLE. EXPLOITATION." In this way, the learning workers in Brecht's play have taught the teacher class struggle, while he has taught them to read.

The Mother had its premiere on January 15, 1932 – the thirteenth anniversary of the death of Rosa Luxemburg – in the Komödienhaus am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin. The scene addresses an elementary change in the understanding of education via its politicization. This change can be said to consist of the following four points:

Firstly, the understanding of learning as an end in itself is profoundly questioned. Brecht goes so far as to stage a situation in which the workers are completely hostile towards the rhetoric of the apparently self-serving form of education proclaimed by the teacher. They ask why should it be irrelevant, if education speaks about fish and nests or about class struggle? And even further: if the subject is irrelevant, then why not actually speak about class struggle? These questions show the limits of the disinterestedness that would characterize the logic of pedagogic examples. The workers in Brecht's play accordingly do not fall into the trap of the rhetoric of "disinterestedness" employed to exempt education from the value structure and interests of the bourgeoisie. They insist on an *interested* education – an education that addresses them as subjects.

Secondly, the scene of Brecht's described above stages a situation of learning that Jacques Rancière would describe as the "method of *stultification*." The teacher thinks that he knows exactly which examples are easy enough for a step-by-step acquisition of knowledge. In his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière shows that common teaching methods reproduce an authoritarian distance between teachers and students that consists not only in the difference of knowledge but in the teacher's power to define distance.⁵ He can lengthen or shorten this distance by introducing structures of power into the order of *explanation*. This tactic produces students whose knowledge always remains inferior to the teacher's, and reproduces the relations of superiority and inferiority that Rancière calls "the method of stultification." In his book – as an example of how this logic can be undermined – he presents the historical case of Joseph Jacotot, a French teacher in the early nineteenth century, exiled to Belgium during the period of Restoration in France, who developed an unconventional method of teaching. When, as a Professor in Leuven, he had to teach French without being able to speak Dutch, he decided to use his own ignorance as a teaching method.

Without any explanation, he made his students read a text along with its translation, setting up the two languages in a relationship to one another that was not directly explicatory, and removing himself from the center of the equation as the one who transmits knowledge. To his surprise, this worked very well. Rancière is interested in this idea of an emancipatory education based not on the teacher's knowledge, but on his deliberate ignorance and on the establishment of some notion of equality at the center of the educational process.

The workers in Brecht's scene are breaking the teacher's power to define; they are refusing the one-way logic of the educational relation. But in contrast to Rancière's ignorant schoolmaster, in Brecht's play the relation of the method of stultification is not subverted by a brave teacher, but thwarted by the workers themselves, who start to pool their learning. They know better than the teacher which steps are necessary for literacy.

Thirdly, Brecht inverts the relation of activity and passivity. The students are at least as actively involved as the teacher in defining the now mutual process of learning – what takes place is learning by teaching and teaching by learning. Brecht worked in the early 1930s in the context of his epic theater and his "learning plays" on techniques for inverting the classical assignments of activity and passivity, in both pedagogical and dramatic questions. He worked out some "epic" strategies in order to challenge theater in its educational capacity.

Fourthly, the aforementioned site of debate between the teacher and the students over teaching methods illustrates the conflict between depoliticized and politicized methods of education. The social dimension and power relations hidden in the seemingly disinterested space of bourgeois education come to light – conflict and dissent become the engine of learning. The scene ends with the famous song "Praise of Learning," sung on stage by the revolutionary workers:

Study from bottom up,
for you who will take the leadership,
it is not too late!
Study the ABC; it is not enough.
but study it! Do not become discouraged,
begin! You must know everything!
You must prepare to take command, now!

Study, man in exile!
Study, man in the prison!
Study, wife in your kitchen!
Study, old-age pensioner!
You must prepare to take command now!
Locate yourself a school, homeless folk!

03/12

e-flux journal #14 — march 2010 Nora Sternfeld
Unglamorous Tasks: What Can Education Learn from its Political Traditions?

Go search some knowledge, you who
freeze!
You who starve, reach for a book:
it will be a weapon.
You must prepare to take command now.
Don't be afraid to question, comrades!

Never believe on faith.
see for yourself!
What you yourself don't learn
you don't know.
Question the reckoning
you yourself must pay it
Set down your finger on each small item.
asking:
where do you get this?
You must prepare to take command now!⁶

In the Germany of the Weimar Republic both the intersection of education and society and efforts to overcome the distinction between an active production of knowledge and its passive reception were central to debates about the possibilities for a critical, revolutionary pedagogy. In 1929, the Marxist theorist and communist politician Edwin Hoernle published *Basic Questions about Proletarian Education*, a handbook for a revolutionary pedagogy.⁷ The book proclaims the unity of politics, economy, and education, and offers a way of understanding education as an important step towards the transformation of society according to another, more just model. Hoernle proclaims that education remains a technique of power and

part of the operations of hegemony as long as the marginalized are not fighting against it and organize, as part of an emergent new society, a new form of education. Walter Benjamin contributed a preface to the book, "A Communist Pedagogy," in which he writes:

Education is a function of class struggle, but it is not only this. In terms of the communist creed, it represents the throughgoing exploitation of the social environment in the service of revolutionary goals. Since this environment is a matter not just of struggle but also of work, education is also a revolutionary education for work. Offering up a program for this, the book is at its best. ... Only if man experiences changes of milieu in all their variety, and can mobilize his energies in the service of the working class again and again and in every new context, will he be capable of that universal readiness for action which the Communist program opposes to what Lenin called "the most repulsive feature of the old bourgeois society": its separation of theory and practice.⁸

The Complexity of Taking a Stand

Over the past twenty years critical pedagogy theorists including Peter McLaren, Henry A. Giroux, Ira Shor, and bell hooks have frequently referred to these debates of the early 1930s –

04/12



photo: trafo.K.



trafo.K & Gabu Heindl, "Wild Translation." photo: trafo.K.



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especially to Brecht and to Antonio Gramsci – and actualized the historical model for a current politicization of education for contemporary neoliberal, postcolonial, and globalized migration societies. Another thinker on education who has been very important for their approach has been the Brazilian teacher, liberation theologian and education theorist Paulo Freire.

As a teacher fighting against illiteracy in Brazil, as a Marxist and liberation theologian, Paulo Freire developed the idea of a “pedagogy of the oppressed,” in which a struggle for justice and equality within education is of central importance. He refers to a fundamental decision with regard to every educational project, of the need to take a stand, to introduce a set of beliefs and, rather than assuming their disinterested neutrality, consciously take them through the process of education. He locates this process as “tactically inside and strategically outside” the system.⁹ So, according to Freire, there is no neutral education, it is always political, either in the sense of a consolidation of the existing circumstances or with respect to their change. Peter Mayo, writing about Gramsci and Freire, sums up this idea in form of a simple question: “On which side are we on, when we educate and teach, when we act?” – a question that always needs to be asked, but not necessarily answered.¹⁰

This apparently self-evident question of “taking sides,” declaring which side we are on, certainly raises a number of further questions: How do we know that we are on the side of the oppressed? Are we always? Do we always want to be? Who are we when we are in the process of taking sides? Who is nevertheless excluded in this process? And the most classic question: How can we radically change the circumstances from the inside?

Thus, the very process of taking a stand and opting for one side grows more complicated. But in order to become complicated, the decision has to be taken in the first place. Only then do the contradictions that beset such a step (which to some extent already haunted Freire) become fully evident and thus active and productive. Because even when we have no foresight of what an education could be on a fundamental level and in the very middle of “the system,” it is this very contradiction that could effect an opening to agency, a possible space for action. If we don’t see power relations as unidimensional blocks, but as battlefields, then the place for learning and teaching can become an “embattled terrain.” Education could then become a practice in which the sayable, thinkable, and doable could be negotiated, and, to quote Peter Mayo, “the dominant forms of thinking and acting can be

challenged in the wide and amorphous areas of civil society.”¹¹

Throughout this historical trajectory, from communist pedagogy, the theatrical “teaching play,” the liberation of youth and their political organization (Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Antonio Gramsci), by way of self-organization in schools and liberation pedagogy (Paulo Freire, but also Célestin Freinet), to critical, radical, and antiracist education (Henry A. Giroux, Ira Shor, and bell hooks), critical educational approaches have been concerned with working in a collective perspective to challenge the hegemonic canon. In this process, knowledge has been considered a weapon and education a form of organization and self-empowerment. Currently, these perspectives are being reread and subject to much criticism. Whereas Paulo Freire could still assume it was possible to work tactically within the institution and strategically outside it (with the goal of eliminating it), today, within globalized neoliberalism, we have to ask ourselves what that could mean under conditions in which we can no longer assume any form of “outside.”

A Decided “Perhaps”

Some of the first principles of emancipatory educational thought, including its fundamental belief in the notion of “autonomous subjects” and “emancipation from immaturity,” have been challenged by poststructuralist theory, according to which such concepts are as empty as the idea of being fully on the “good side” in the context of a debate or a struggle. Against this background, current educational theorists are trying to integrate poststructuralist concepts such as “event” and “experience” into the processes of education. With this, the “impossible” becomes as important and as active a category as the “possible,” providing their discourse with a reflective edge lifting it beyond the pragmatic and functionalist implementation of an idea or a program. And there is always something unforeseeable in education, which cannot be planned: perhaps this is the reason why Sigmund Freud called education (together with politics and psychoanalysis) “an impossible task.” It becomes especially impossible where education is poised to engage with social change, to consciously effect transformation in the direction of social change. Such a perspective encourages acceptance of a massive loss of control and of the risk of failure. For Jacques Derrida, the impossible is the condition of possibility of the possible. In the context of education this could suggest that there is a dimension of agency in its very uncontrollability. Because when there is only space for the necessary, change is impossible. Thus Derrida

integrates the “perhaps” in his philosophical discourse:

I will not say that this thought of the impossible possible, this other thinking of the possible is a thinking of necessity but rather, as I have also tried to demonstrate elsewhere, a thinking of the “perhaps” that Nietzsche speaks of and that philosophy has always tried to subjugate. There is no future and no relation to the coming of the event without experience of the “perhaps.”¹²

The necessity of a taking a stance politically and the attendant impossibility of knowing whether we are intellectually on the right side has a way of producing a mode of impossibility that challenges education with a qualifying “perhaps,” a temporal suspension that we have to assume, not as something arbitrary but as a constitutive component of the very act of making a decision.

What consequences might such a concept as the “decided perhaps” hold for education? Derrida himself puts it this way: “For if this impossible that I’m talking about were to arrive perhaps one day, I leave you to imagine the consequences. Take your time but be quick about it because you do not know what awaits you.”¹³

Who is Turning?

Having gained a limited sense of the historicity of our question, let us now move into the present and turn towards current developments in the curatorial field. Still, the question remains the same: how can one conceive educational processes that take a position and address questions of agency while neither knowing nor wanting to pretend to know what is right and what the consequences of one’s actions may be? Within the critical segment of the educational world, this question led to the articulation of many other questions such as: What is the critical potential and what are the complications and traps of educational practices that remain within existing power relationships? How can one negotiate from “inside” institutions with respect to changing them or changing one’s own position or that of society? And what role can failure, an inevitable component, play in this?

Questions such as these have been raised in recent years from the perspective of a critical educational practice by numerous self-organized groups, as well as by teachers and mediators at various meetings, schools, universities, and exhibition institutions. Not infrequently, they took positions against the hegemonic “truths” of the field in question, organized themselves as best they could, and were sometimes more

combative, more experimental, more reformist – and in almost all cases, quite marginalized.

In the thematic outline for a conference entitled “Cultures of the Curatorial,” recently held in Leipzig, Beatrice von Bismarck describes “the curatorial” as “a cultural practice which goes decisively beyond the making of exhibitions,” which has “a genuine method of generating, mediating, and reflecting experience and knowledge.”¹⁴ This shift from organizing exhibitions at the level of visible staging to the production of knowledge connects two areas that have traditionally been closely related in the history of the museum, but are nevertheless rather far apart in terms of their symbolic capital and attention to discourse: the curatorial and the educational.

Thus “the curatorial” relies to a certain extent on the logic of mere representation and gets involved in processes that it produces itself: so it is no longer about exhibitions as sites for setting up valuable objects and representing objective values, but rather as spaces for curatorial action in which unusual encounters and discourses become possible, in which the unplannable seems more important than, say, precise plans for exhibition and display.

How did it come to this? From the 1990s onward, there was a “reflexive turn” in exhibition theory, in which all the conditions of exhibiting and representing and the associated types of institutional logics have come under scrutiny. Following these more or less thorough self-critiques and analyses of the conditions of production, in recent years an advanced segment of the field has increasingly been raising the question of curatorial agency. Even as they presumed there to be no external standpoint for criticism, they nevertheless asked the question, “What is to be done?” The question underwent a variety of deconstructive turns, some involving transitions from curatorial work to education.

Looking at these shifts from the perspective of education, the point of intersection with the curatorial can be described somewhat differently: here, the encounter with a discourse from the advanced segment of the theory-heavy field of the art world is at once productive and surprising, capable of empowering educational discourse or throwing it off guard.

Thus, if we examine the conditions of the overlap with the educational that suddenly emerged in curatorial discourse, it becomes clear that the “educational turn in curating” functions as a turn exclusively for curators. It instrumentalizes “education” as a series of protocols, bypassing its complex internal struggles with notions of possibility and transformation.

07/12

e-flux journal #14 — march 2010 Nora Sternfeld
Unglamorous Tasks: What Can Education Learn from its Political Traditions?

Much of what has been taking place for a long time beyond an intellectual public for art – in the barely visible shadows of what comes to our attention (and in which education is taken to be a purely specialized arena) – now certainly needs to be discussed and processed in differentiated ways. Suddenly, these areas seem to be of interest to the field as a whole – a discourse that has been marginalized for years is now associated with the themes of conferences and publications, with artistic, political, activist, and theoretical approaches, drawing international attention. However, questions remain: Who ultimately profits from this discussion? And does the largely feminized segment of mediators and educators, as well as the knowledge from schools, exhibition institutions, youth groups, and so on, really belong to it? And are these elements in turn provided with symbolic capital?

Let's consider the unequal distribution of symbolic capital among curators and mediators in the art world. It can be described using a classical set of analyses from feminism: the powerful social differentiation between production and reproduction – in this case of knowledge. Thus the point here, once again, is to connect the question “Who is speaking?” with that of authorized authorship – “Who has the power to define?” – and to ask how the powerful distinction between the production and reproduction of knowledge can be radically broken down.

Now it appears that the concept of “the curatorial” may be leaving these problems far behind, since, after all, it understands education as simply part of the curatorial production of knowledge. On the one hand, this connection represents an achievement, to the extent that the binary logics of representation and reception (between showing and viewing) and of production and reproduction of knowledge (between curating and mediating what is on view) are overcome. Nevertheless, it seems important to consider – in addition to the question of whom it benefits – what potential omissions can perhaps result from such a conflation of the educational and the curatorial. With the help of a few concepts, I would like to shed light on a rehabilitation of the various logics education itself employs – perhaps, in part, to make the contribution of the educational productive for the curatorial as well.

2. THE UNGLAMOROUS IN EDUCATION

In 1989, the volume *Remaking History* was published as part of the Dia Art Foundation's series “Discussions in Contemporary Culture.” It discussed the question of how to address the canon in the field of art and exhibitions. In her

now famous essay “Who Claims Alterity?” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers back to the attribution of the “other speaker” and the “native informant” and rejects the Western need for another representation of the Other. She particularly warns against narrating the refusal of rights in a way that covers up counter-narratives and counter-representations. She mistrusts the power of institutions of representation and instead proposes working on an unglamorous pedagogy of the seminar room:

In a sense our task is to make people ready to listen, and that is not determined by argument. Indirect and maddeningly slow, forever running the risk of demagoguery and coercion mingled with the credulous vanity and class interest of teacher and student, it is still only institutionalized education in the human sciences that is a long-term and collective method for making people want to listen. As far as I can see, remaking (the discipline of) history has its only chance on this unglamorous and often tedious register. Therefore I propose the persistent establishment and re-establishment, the repeated consolidating in undoing, of a strategy of education and classroom pedagogy. . . . Such a strategy must speak from within the emancipatory master narratives even while taking a distance from them.¹⁵

Spivak consciously abandons both the field of representation and rapid changes in the speaker's position to instead make her way over the slow terrain of educational processes, where one should work on what can be heard, on changing what can be said, seen, and done. This seems to me to be an opportunity to address the canon without immediately closing the resulting openings, precisely because it is neither heroic nor glamorous.

Starting from Spivak's discussions, I would like to address here the educational aspects that are part of the experiences and practices of mediation work. I will do so using examples from the actual practice of trafo.K, an office for cultural mediation and education in Vienna, where Renate Höllwart, Elke Smodics, and I have for the past ten years worked on collaborative projects at the intersection between education and the production of knowledge.¹⁶

It is the “unglamorous,” which I position as a counter to the trend towards the fashionable and representative in the curatorial, that the following approaches share.

The Tedious

Schooling and education take place daily.

Usually, they are not so interesting. In our projects, we repeatedly ask the question “Is that so?” in an effort to trigger a process of unlearning the things we take for granted, as well as those that our audience does. In the process, we create contexts and ask questions of ourselves, of the institutions in which and with which we work, and of society. Sometimes these questions do not seem very rebellious. Sometimes they provoke our audience, sometimes the institutions. They are not very spectacular, they do not always lead to images that can be shown, and often they are not sexy and need time to develop. We cannot even be sure of whether they really have a lasting effect. And yet it is precisely this tedious aspect of the educational that seems to reach the place of everyday life, where battles over understanding and hegemony take place just as much as they do in the spectacular.

The Disagreeable

In educational projects that cross social fields, for example, we respond to circumstances and create spaces in which many things that we would rather not hear about are discussed. Far from creating spaces for disagreement, in Jacques Rancière’s sense (as politics of dissent that are challenging the logics of power), we intend them primarily as spaces of non-unity, of the heterogeneity of views, positions, and approaches. It is a place where forms of taste, opinions, and worldviews that transgress an individual’s habitual boundaries can encounter one another. Here people often say things that seem totally impossible to us. For example, we encounter racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism that are not legitimized by the attitudes of polite bourgeois society and that seem to scare us far more than long-standing racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic structures, which have become part of our habitual way of seeing ourselves. How can we deal with this? How can one reveal the structures of racism, heteronormativity, and social distinction within which these things can be said and, conversely, within which they seem unacceptable? We try to create a space in which it is possible to come to terms with these things together. There are several traps and types of failure we encounter. I will mention only two in the form of a paradox:

1. We sometimes use our bourgeois, authoritative right to speak from a position of power in order to prevent this sort of thing from legitimately becoming present in the room.
2. We sometimes allow something we deplore to stand in the room in order to prevent it from undermining the discussion we have managed to achieve, thereby performing a paradox inherent within educational practice.



photo: trafo.K.

This can be illustrated by the example of a wall of posters we developed with apprentices in a public space in front of the exhibition “Gastarbajteri” (Immigrant Labor) at the Wien Museum in 2004. Our discourse concerns the questions of the apprentices. Creating a common space for the un-learning of powerful foregone conclusions sometimes worked well, and sometimes not so well – we realized that the apprentices often did not agree with our position. We tried to discuss it in some moments and we silenced it in others. The work in the public space that we did together was a result of this process: on one hand it refers to an art discourse in the public space featuring critical reflections on Austrian racism and media; on the other hand it is a testimonial of the simultaneous, successful negotiations with our interlocutors in the group and a failure to arrive at an acceptable “position”; and the process as a whole runs the risk of a certain instrumentalization of these young people.

The Compromised

Both working with people who do not necessarily share our opinion and working with socially relevant themes often put us on uncertain ground. The important thing here seems to be to constantly come to terms with our own outside involvements. By doing so, our approaches, the research that results from collaborating with different parties, and their questions, constantly raise new questions. The tedious work consists in tolerating the fact that shared critical processes can never be brought to a conclusion.

The “Versteinerte Feindschaften” (Petrified Enmities) youth project organized by trafo.K (Renate Höllwart, Charlotte Martinz-Turek, and Claudia Ehgartner) together with the artists Alexander Jöchl and Hermann Lohninger and students from the Handelsakademie Lambach (Lambach Business Academy), as part of the 2003 Festival der Regionen (Festival of Regions), took a war memorial in Lambach, in Upper

Austria, as the point of departure for grappling with the history of the place, its Nazi past, and current debates on coming to terms with the past and constructions of history. The project took as its theme hidden and open enmities and how they are inscribed in public spaces. The young participants developed, in cooperation with the artists, interventions in public space that offered alternative perspectives to official history.

A great deal of discussion took place over the course of the project, throughout which the young participants began to ask more questions, and in turn became increasingly critical. Nevertheless, some of their questions remained problematic. Some things they took away with them: in information sheets on the history of Nazi crimes, they reproduced the language by which a post-Nazi society preserves itself, in which its narratives of the death marches emphasized the Jewish capos rather than the Nazi criminals. We tried to reflect on these aspects of the project, and realized that regardless of the actual outcomes, it was the very ability to take part in such uncomfortable discussions – that is, through the process rather than the result – that underpinned the project.

To the extent that educational projects are always located in social circumstances, they are also determined by them. The goal is to create distance, attack the canon, the dominant school of thought, or history, but it can never succeed completely – these elements cannot be replaced, but they can be engaged with. This feeling is sometimes uncomfortably palpable. In a certain sense, the educational has a lot to do with being prepared to allow oneself to engage with the impossibility of remaining “clean” in the process of doing so (as if one was ever clean to begin with).

The Unsound

trafo.K was invited to do a site-specific education project at the Centre d'Art Contemporain, Genève. Together with the curators – the Swiss mediation collective microsillons – we decided to work with a group of thirty thirteen-year-old schoolchildren from the German school in Geneva. The opening was in November 2009; the exhibition was extended and will continue to run until February 14, 2010. Whereas we represented an approach that was both open and conceptual, and wanted to treat the students as education experts in order to develop possible forms of action based on their perspectives, the students themselves preferred to tinker and build. We tried, as best we could, to bring the exhibition and its critical questions concerning education into our discussion. On the basis of our collaboration, the children

developed various models based on exhibition works and themes. The results were neither very reflexive nor very conceptual. But they did suggest some imprecise and wild forms for addressing critical themes of the exhibition in sometimes open, sometimes uncritical ways. The pupils reacted to the artworks in the exhibition by rebuilding their ideas in their own way, and we called this a form of “wild translation.”

10/12



photo: trafo.K.

When the project came to an end, we were left with a number of questions about the institution, about our position, and about the topics we discussed. So we decided to make the contradictions and our questions a crucial part of the project. We then reacted to the reaction of the pupils by asking questions as educators and mediators about the artworks and about the work of the pupils.

The Beside-the-Point and the Unpresentable

Projects are not always as focused and critical as we would like them to be. To some extent, they are open processes and the unexpected results they produce can be productive. These results are not always presentable and are sometimes embarrassing, often beside the point. Sometimes, however, just such results can lead to very interesting considerations, questions concerning foregone conclusions, reformulations, and spaces for action. Sometimes there is no result at all.

In choosing these examples, I have deliberately emphasized those small, tedious, unpresentable, and strenuous aspects of the educational, with which all mediators and educators are familiar, but which rarely find their way into their discussions and theory. They are probably not what people have in mind when they allude to the great collective possibilities of curatorial knowledge production. Just to be clear: these are not the goal, but just one part of

e-flux journal #14 — march 2010 Nora Sternfeld
Unglamorous Tasks: What Can Education Learn from its Political Traditions?

educational processes. They should likewise not be understood as strategies – they are better described methodologically or politically. They are reflections, tactics, and forms of dealing with conditions and contingencies.

I could indeed formulate a joint goal for educational and curatorial work: that it challenge the apparatus of value-coding with an eye to changing what can be seen, said, and done. How and when this can succeed is determined as much by the rules and exclusions specific to a field, by its traditions and rifts, as much as by contingencies and forms for dealing with them – and as they are not necessarily the same in both the educational and curatorial fields, it was my intention to discuss several of these approaches and tactics here. My interest is in the slow and tedious qualities, the traps and failures, the moments when nothing important occurs, not even for the production of knowledge. At this point, one could paraphrase Derrida: only if it is possible for nothing productive to occur can something productive occur. Perhaps the recent curatorial discourses that have begun to emphasize the productivity of knowledge can learn from the quiet, laborious, unpresentable processes of the educational.

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Translated from the German by Steven Lindberg

11/12

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e-flux journal #14 — march 2010 Nora Sternfeld
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In this context see for example the work of Tony Bennett, Peter Vergo, or Douglas Crimp.

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Bertolt Brecht, *The Mother*, trans. Lee Baxandall (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 76–77.

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Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, (Stanford University Press, 2008.)

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Brecht, *The Mother*, 79.

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Edwin Hoernle, *Grundfragen proletarischer Erziehung*, ed. Lutz von Werder (Frankfurt am Main: März, 1970).

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Walter Benjamin, "A Communist Pedagogy," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 274.

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Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 90.

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Mayo, *Politische Bildung*.

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Mayo, *Politische Bildung*, 22.

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Jacques Derrida, "The Future of the Profession or the Unconditional University," in *Deconstructing Derrida*, ed. Peter Pericles Trifonas and Michael A. Peters (London: Macmillan, 2005), 22.

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Ibid., 24.

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See <http://www.kdk-leipzig.de/veranstaltungen.html?file=a/pdf/Conference%20Cultures%20of%20the%20Curatorial.pdf>

15
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Who Claims Alterity?" in *Remaking History*, Discussions

in *Contemporary Culture* 4, ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1989), 200.

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See trafo.K's Web site at <http://www.trafo-k.at>.

12/12

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