

Fahim Amir, Eva Egermann,
Marion von Osten, and Peter
Spillmann
**What Shall We
Do...?**

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What follows is a multigenerational conversation between the philosopher Fahim Amir, the artist Eva Egermann, and the artists and curators Peter Spillmann and Marion von Osten, about the varieties of antagonism currently shaping the production of knowledge.

Scarcity and Integration

Marion von Osten: I would like to begin our conversation with a hypothesis: the production of knowledge has entered a phase defined by certain tensions, leading to a variety of conflicts we face in our work in the art academy as well as, and more importantly, in our intellectual and cultural work. On the one hand, we can observe a rise in the significance of certified expert knowledge bearing academic institutions' seal of approval – this process is evident in the European debates over BAs/MAs/PhDs, Clusters of Excellence, and Collaborative Research Centers. This structure of training and research, with its increasingly hierarchic organization, is in part being introduced in European art schools as well. On the other hand, knowledge produced and passed on outside schools and institutions has become more and more important over the past fifty years, as have experts who are not academics. The practices of everyday life and popular culture have emerged with greater prominence, as has the knowledge produced by social movements, and some of their spokespeople have become part of the curricula. Among other consequences, has been an emergence of critical methodologies that reflect on Eurocentric epistemology, introduce a multiple-actor approach, conjure up the death of the author, embrace the vernacular, et cetera. What should also be mentioned in this context is the attention paid within institutions to what is called “artistic research” and the call for transdisciplinary work. Yet extra-institutional knowledge is also an essential part of contemporary cultural and artistic production.

Peter Spillmann: It is not so much we, as the producers of knowledge or culture, who are at the center of the antagonisms you describe, but the educational institution. We can move fairly well in both extra-institutional and institutional contexts. For the university and other institutions of higher education, by contrast, the rapidly rising importance of extra-institutional knowledge implies to my mind that their role as authorities over the legitimacy of knowledge has become questionable. I think the ongoing reforms and efforts to create new systems of certification are also an institutional – as well as political – strategy to counteract the increasing dissolution of the boundaries of knowledge, to shore up the power to legitimate knowledge and define education; and

certifications, as a technique of control and discipline, obviously play a central role in this process.

Eva Egermann: The American situation already illustrates the conflicts this creates for the individual. Many universities have publicly accessible programs, which is to say, a wide public audience is invited to attend seminars and lectures. But official enrollment at these universities, which enables a student to receive a diploma, to become a university graduate: that is something very few can afford. The recent tuition hikes at American universities, most prominently in the University of California system, have led to protests and occupations at UC Santa Cruz and seven other campuses in California.

PS: I think we need to distinguish between political or institutional strategies and the consequences they have for those whom they affect. Creating scarcity is the central principle of the new institutional policy. This includes intensified efforts to condition and select, through for instance modularized curricula and multiple-graded degrees, as well as the social enforcement of certain minimum standards candidates are expected to meet in order to get a job. Economic interests play a role as well, aiming on the one hand to create a scarcity of

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public education so that the remainder can be turned over to a lucrative educational market, and on the other hand to offload as much research and development spending as possible onto the public sector. This not only leads to financial shortages, it also narrows the margins for those whose interests have nothing to do with product development. That the public institutions would quickly embrace this new educational order was ultimately foreseeable. But why, given these increasingly tenuous conditions, the great majority of teachers and students would still place their faith in the universities and the degrees they confer, let alone redouble their faith in them – that, I think, is one central question.

Fahim Amir: University diplomas are meant to represent objective and standardized certificates of competence – and yet at this very juncture, we can observe that the exercise of power becomes increasingly personalized and informal; this “neo-feudalist spirit” is manifest in the growing number of autocratic bodies that are even less transparent and subject to even less democratic control than in the past.

EE: The staff and budget cuts that lead to diminishing access to universities as well as to reduced resources, possibilities, and space at



Chair Strike installation at the Academy of fine Arts Vienna, PC-Lab, in the framework of *Strike, she said*, by GirlsOnHorses (Auer, Egermann, Straganz, Wieger).

these institutions, also increasingly render the lives of all those who work there highly precarious. In spite of the distinction between “students,” “teachers,” and “staff,” most of these people are affected by precarization to some degree and urgently need new forms of organization.

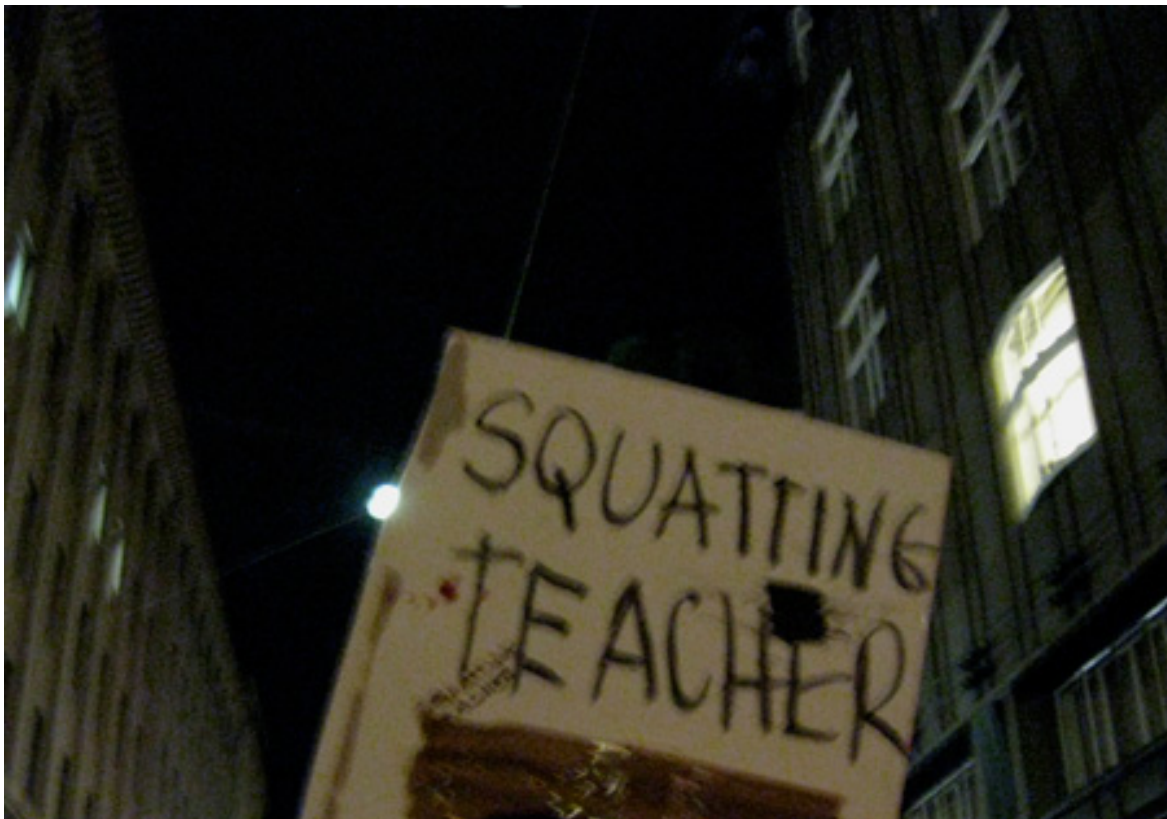
FA: One far-reaching problem at the universities is that academics are mostly occupied with administrative work and teaching, when these are at the same time the least prestigious academic functions and contribute the least to their careers. Another line of conflict concerns the problems surrounding property in, and the accessibility of, knowledge; for example, a large part of publicly funded research takes place outside the universities, where the production of knowledge can be organized in more autonomous structures, yet the results will ultimately be the property of the commissioning party – the state or agency paying for the project.

PS: There are two different dynamic processes in play here: on the one hand, there are the efforts undertaken to make a university “excellent.” This is where marketing or personnel politics comes in. The reinvention of the educational institution in the world of business

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has a lot to do with public relations, with presenting a flawless image and constructing a perfect narrative of success, professionalism, and contemporary relevance. On the other hand, it takes familiarity with a field to recognize relevant knowledge and context-specific current practices of the exchange of knowledge are. This involves competencies similar to those required in cultural production – and yet the “chief executive officers” of educational institutions generally do not possess these competencies themselves. Despite all the talk about innovation in the institutions, there is virtually no serious debate about what adequate conditions for a contemporary culture of knowledge would look like.

MvO: What can be observed, however, is a changed self-conception on the part of the state. Economistic discourse appears to be taking place on the supranational level, too, in EU directives, for example. At the same time, neoliberal interpellations notwithstanding, this is about an expansion and not a reduction of the bureaucratic apparatus in the educational institutions – only this apparatus now operates within the requisite private-public constellations. I think it is perhaps better understood as a different way of formalizing and



Squatting Teacher banner at the Mass Demonstration for Free Education in Vienna, 28th Oct. 2009.

discursivizing the relationship between the state and private enterprise.

PS: That is a central point, I agree. To put it strongly, we might even say that the field of education has in recent years become the central stage on which a state that has undergone neoliberal reforms can produce an especially conspicuous mise-en-scène of its newly optimized functionality, a production that even allows it to compensate for the loss of authority in other areas, such as communications or healthcare.

MVO: We must understand all of this against the backdrop of a post-Fordist transformation that encompasses all of society. Not only are qualifications certified by schools and universities considered marketable skills – framed as “competencies” – but qualifications acquired outside the school system are also increasingly considered according to the same terms. Post-Fordism has raised the requirements by which knowledge is considered necessary for productive performance on the job, and the knowledge I have acquired at an educational institution, a university, or a school, is no longer enough. Social skills and the ability to work in a team, for example, are necessary qualifications I may bring to the job without

formal “training.” So the primary aim behind the new gradation of degrees is to create the shortest and most efficient possible path for the majority through the curricula – an intentional contraction. The new reforms do not in fact make the course of studies as such the central value: studies, like research, must first and foremost be applied. Today’s internship, and the university of applied sciences too, illustrate this path toward a professional training more and more geared towards job requirements – but this training can only partly satisfy the needs of an increasingly flexible labor market, or the composition of biopolitical labor, as Negri and Hardt call it. That makes it difficult for the humanities to legitimize themselves, and the same goes for art schools. This process is key to the central conflicts, but also to possible alternative outcomes, because one could begin to derive potentials at this point as well.

EE: It might be interesting in this context to come back to the distinction marked by the concepts of “Herrschaftswissen” (knowledge that serves the exercise of authority) and “herrschaftskritisches Wissen” (knowledge that enables a critique of authority). The former would be the sort of knowledge that serves to reproduce and consolidate hegemonic

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It is not about the biscuits, it is about the whole bakery..., Action media spectacle. Occupied Academy of fine Arts Vienna, 1st Nov. 2009.

conditions. The latter, by contrast, would be a knowledge of the prevailing conditions and the powers that control them, as well as an awareness of one's own complicity with these conditions and the social struggles against them: an emancipatory knowledge of resistant experiences in history and in the present that is rooted in social struggles and movements. Today, we reencounter this extra-institutional knowledge in postgraduate and master's programs such as gender, cultural, and postcolonial studies.

FA: To my mind, it is important and at the same time difficult to shield my politics from the conceptual trends in academia; against the hype forming in strange ways around authoritative subjects that are then, for a certain period of time, brought up at almost every panel discussion. The creation of such hype involves an inscrutable interplay between a whole number of actors, and there are large asymmetries regarding their charisma and their impact factor. In the Marxist tradition there is the phrase, the "revolutionary Party as the university of the working class," which once promised a different interrelation between theory and praxis, between democracy and knowledge, between cognitive capacity and ability in battle; an autonomous production of knowledge independent of the academic construction of theory is indispensable, it seems to me, for any praxis that envisions a fundamental transformation of the social order – and "autonomous," it is important to note, means anything but cut-off or isolated from the larger context. The fact that activists in subcultural, cultural-leftist, or autonomist contexts pay so much attention to academic theory as a source of buzzwords always strikes me as a problem just as much as does the tiresome exegesis of the classics in Marxological contexts.

MvO: Creating a permanent place for feminist or postcolonial knowledge in the institutions was an important struggle. The bigger problem today is that this knowledge becomes an additional qualification sold for a fee or used in the education market as a competitive advantage.

PS: Ambitious universities' marketing departments operate according a logic by which they can envision the creation of a highly promising niche degree out of any social discourse whatsoever, just as long as the niche has a certain degree of intensity. But we must consider first and foremost how this knowledge circulates in different social and intercultural constellations, how it keeps growing and which new perspectives and emancipatory movements it enables. Right now, that is certainly not something that is happening within the

framework of, say, postcolonial studies.

FA: The most important factor enabling the domestication in the university of radical knowledge produced by social movements can be found in the everyday function of the university as a bureaucratic monster: the need to organize classrooms, meetings of administrative bodies, power struggles within the university, the administration of exams, et cetera. All that exhausts people, and between these obligations, they often don't even know anymore what they came to the university to do, or they simply no longer have the strength to do it. Critical reflections on the institutionalization of the women's movement noticed this effect immediately after the first women's studies programs were established. Tearing down the connections between subjects participating in a struggle within the university and those outside it is a step that further enables integration into the "business as usual" at the university. But the link between commercial value and anti-capitalism within capitalist socialization does not strike me as something fundamentally new – the exchange value, after all, is the primary deciding factor in capitalism. Remember what Lenin said: the capitalists will sell even the rope by which they will be hanged.

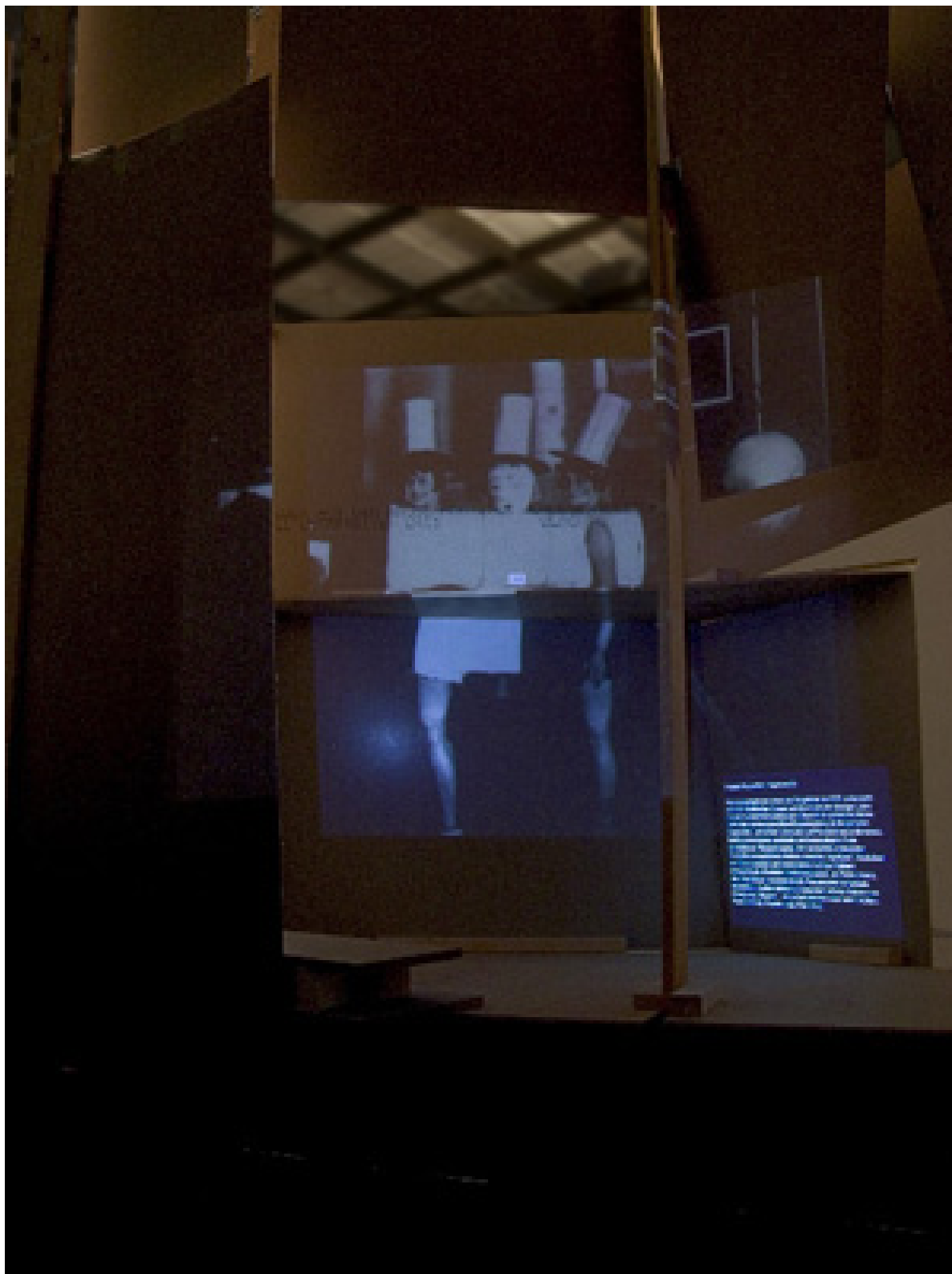
PS: I don't think that the university can ever become "ours"! The idea of the university as such, as an institution, with its humanist-bourgeois-liberal tradition – something the choice of Bologna for the ominous meeting of the ministers of education was patently aimed to bring into symbolic play – embodies the Eurocentric culture of the institution. Attempts to open the university to other actors or practices of knowledge – Marion mentioned this at the very beginning of our conversation – lead at best to the formation of new critical theory or the growing differentiation of new disciplines and methods. And what Fahim is talking about is the core of the very conflict we get involved in – an ultimately fruitless one – every time we try to change the institutions.

FA: During the battles at the universities in northern Italy in the late 1970s, people developed the idea of the "counter-university" – which is to say, of fighting within the university for causes that are antagonistic to the constitution of the university and of the social order tied to it. Another aim was to intervene in one's own subjectivation and to turn the exploitative or symbiotic relationship between university employees and the university in the direction of an emancipatory parasitism.

MvO: Around the same time, Ivan Illich pointed out that the desire for democratization through education, which promises to free people of their class backgrounds, has the

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Simone Hain, Christiane Post, Karin Rebbert, Katja Reichard, Marion von Osten, Peter Spillmann, Axel John Wieder, *Insert 3* 6th Werkleitz Biennial, Volkspark Halle a.S., 2004. Replica of Vladimir Tatlin's stage set for the production of "Sangesi" by Velimir Chlebnikow, Petrograd 1923. On the back of the stage slide projections various autonomous theater and agitprop groups : "Blue Collars", worker's theater group from Moscow, Russia; "Rote Schmiede", 1920s agitprop group from Halle a.S., Germany; "Neue Sachlichkeit" mask ball at the Burg Giebichenstein Halle a.S., Germany, 1925; "Brigade Feuerstein", 1980s popular GDR song theater group from Hoyerswerda, Germany, 1923.



Simone Hain, Christiane Post, Karin Rebbert, Katja Reichard, Marion von Osten, Peter Spillmann, Axel John Wieder, *Insert 2*, 6th Werkleitz Biennial, Volkspark Halle a.S., 2004. Unrealized model of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's Raum der Gegenwart which he designed 1930 for Alexander Dorner and the Provinzialmuseum Hannover. In the context of the 6th Werkleitz Biennial it functioned as a display for material about strategies of participatory knowledge production and distribution.



Simone Hain, Christiane Post, Karin Rebbert, Katja Reichard, Marion von Osten, Peter Spillmann, Axel John Wieder: *Insert 1* 6th Werkleitz Biennial, Volkspark Halle a.S., 2004. Reconstruction of Alexander Rodtschenko's interior design for a worker's club, originally realized for the Russian pavilion at the World Fair, Paris 1925. During the Biennial *Insert 1* was displayed at the "Halle School of Common Property".

paradoxical effect of introducing a new hierarchy. It means that social mobility is the de facto privilege of those who submit to the sanctioned certifications; all other necessary knowledge that could be acquired in everyday life or at the workplace remains without social recognition, leaving the division of labor and the class hierarchy unchallenged.

PS: If you mean recognition in the academic context, then I agree. But there were and are innumerable opportunities outside the university to experience social advancement – the child of the contractor who makes millions in real estate, the guest worker who becomes a restaurant entrepreneur, et cetera. What is interesting is that the greatest barriers are currently being erected precisely against social advancement from the margins, against that which is self-made, is built on improvisation and situational knowledge. Nowadays, a dishwasher will have a hard time becoming a millionaire without an MBA.

MvO: We should note here that the academy of arts does still leave a certain amount of leeway, leeway we need to defend. Nowhere else can people without academic degrees still be appointed professors. And if matters keep moving in the direction they are, that will soon be a thing of the past.

PS: Another reason I went to study at a free art school instead of a university was that I never quite understood how studying at a university really works. No one in my family had gone to a university, and so it wasn't something I just picked up along the way. I didn't know what mattered most, how I was supposed to find my way through a university's offerings, what would be the best thing to do. Knowing what would be important requires that you already have defined interests – or have been introduced to a specific milieu. Acquiring knowledge at a university already presupposes a great deal of knowledge or habitualized experience.

MvO: Or people didn't manage to complete their studies because they were tripped up by the inscrutable syllabi, or, at the academy of art, by the professors' self-mythologizing and their sexism. There was a lack of "herrschaftskritisches Wissen." Poststructuralist theories were an incredibly important instrument in helping to understand what all of this meant beyond the personal level. But when I was a student in the 1980s, this did not take place either at the university or at the academy of art – it wasn't soft rock.

EE: On the other hand, there are also opportunities and productive situations at the universities, situations in which people can experience studying as a form that enables individual action, a space that enables them to

reflect on the social structures within which they study. Artistic strategies then in turn offer a possibility to intervene in these conflicts, to create spaces or counterpublics. During the occupations of the universities in Austria and the international protest movement of the fall and winter of 2009–10, we saw an intense realization of this possibility: the university as a place of contentious debate, of rebellion and insurrection. These occupations not only succeeded in unleashing a broad debate over educational policies, but also enabled the re-politicization of many areas and uncontrolled spaces. This intensity and eruption created absurd situations of teaching and learning and alternative practices of knowledge; a community of teachers and students, we might say, united by a defined goal: to subvert the structures of the university. The participating groups – Salong (Munich), Academy of Refusal (Vienna), Interflugs (Berlin), and 10th Floor (London) – describe this collective learning process as occurring in the midst of an eruption, as something that was able to shatter established structures of power. Squatting turned the rigid, cool, neoclassical auditorium into a site of negotiations. Solidarity and collective euphoria created the energy required for an unforeseeable amount of work that needed to be done.

Immanence or Exodus

MvO: So intra-institutional and extra-institutional knowledge can not be conceived as being quite so distinct anymore. Their relationship is not dialectical but rather one of immanence. And yet it doesn't seem easy to describe the quality of difference in the knowledge production we engender in our collective work. Instead, we tend to exhaust ourselves in contention with the institutions. As someone born in the early 1960s, I am a member of a generation of autodidacts, the so-called brilliant dilettantes. Doing-it-yourself returned to prominence in the 1990s, when people taught themselves software, graphic design, how to make music, video, and texts, how to write reviews. Not that any of this is unusual in the art context. But what was really at stake was that we would not accept the traditional division of labor in the art context any more than anywhere else, and that we would take the relations of production into our own hands. The possibility of doing that in a collective was a way to escape the can, the eternal "stand and alone."

EE: A few years ago, I worked with others within the framework of the Manoa Free University. Together we organized study circles, but also projects, publications, parties, and exhibitions. The MFU provided a sort of structure for collaboration, a shared space for the political

and artistic production of knowledge, and the ability to reference a defined collective context. After the first round of neoliberal reforms subjecting Austria's universities to an economic logic – including GATS (the General Agreement on Trade in Services), the introduction of the law on universities in 2002, and the abolition of student codetermination, something I experienced in fairly drastic ways because I was at the time an active member of the ÖH (Austrian Students' Association, the general organization representing students at Austrian universities) – it seemed more necessary than ever to create autonomous structures, or to form self-organized structures outside the university, instead of helping to implement the processes of economization and being at the mercy of the prevailing conditions. And similar structures were being founded everywhere at the time. An autonomous, extra-institutional, or “different” praxis of knowledge of the sort you describe was an important aspiration for us. By now, the perspectives within extra-institutional cultural contexts have also shifted, I think, especially when a project is not decidedly political. Not least importantly, it has become clear that such initiatives are no less part of a system of art defined by an economy of reputation. For example, a young artist recently told me that she wanted to found a self-organized “off-space” because, she said, curators appreciated when someone's biography included “experience in self-organization.” So I guess it is not a given that a different knowledge-praxis of the sort we are discussing would have to take place outside the university; perhaps it is simply a matter of fundamentally different criteria.

FA: Exactly – and that, it is important to note, is not the same: most off-spaces hardly strike me as “extra-institutional”; they seem “small-scale institutional” instead. Most of them do not at all break with the prevailing aesthetic, social, and organizational procedures – but problematizing these procedures are an indispensable part of being such a space in the first place. So this is not about some sort of radical purity on the part of subjects, but about how they interrelate. That is something we – half a dozen very different people with backgrounds in art, culture, and theory – tried to implement in partly experimental, partly directed ways when we founded the performance bar Schnapsloch four years ago. It was important to us that we operate this space without the support of financial backers (on whom we otherwise depend), that we put the focus of aesthetic production on the fashioning of specific socialities, cultivating perspectives that problematized our relations to reception, participation, and curatorial work. We will close

the space down this summer because we don't want to become subculture administrators: when there is no avenue of defense left, it still strikes me as better to do what people did with several social centers in Italy – they smashed the windows of their own social spaces rather than allow them to be yuppified.

PS: On the other hand, there is no form of action in the production or communication of knowledge that is not embedded in social structures and shaped by relationships, between people who are friends, meet on neutral terms, or do not like one another at all. And this is true of all contexts equally. Even in a highly formalized academic context, all knowledge-communication processes are a permanent emotional roller-coaster ride; encouragement, support, preferential treatment, competition, interference, et cetera. The same holds for any other independent and self-determined context. But there people can more radically think through – and sometimes live – the social intensity tied to a shared cause and interest, whereas the institution tends to emphasize bureaucratic administration even of the social aspect, and often fosters its use for strategic purposes.

FA: I agree – there is an atmosphere of competition, envy, focus on status, and thinking in hierarchies, in combination with the wish to be part of a trend, that is characteristic of the academy, but also of artistic and cultural production. This atmosphere is also the reason why I have time and again preferred self-organized contexts, which, though they are not immune to these issues, offer other possible ways of dealing with them.

PS: Among my personal acquaintance, I know about a dozen people who, after twenty or more years of innovative project-related work in a wide variety of fields – from exhibitions and participative projects to the creation of entire curricula – now receive rejections in response to applications because they are “overqualified.” They are told, “You have already implemented so many demanding projects, we don't think we can offer you enough!” Or, on the other hand, they are rejected because they don't have a degree – “Unfortunately, a BA or MA is an absolute requirement for working with us!” These people are now forced to look seriously into getting some degree or other for 20,000 Euros. That is a perversion and a gigantic scandal. The minimum demand in light of such absurd developments should be that the first degree, at whatever age, be free.

MvO: People need knowledge for different reasons. Sometimes you just need experience and to exchange views. The projects I am involved in are more about initiating cognitive

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processes and less about knowing theory and having the right quotes ready. They are about gaining insight, about perceiving in new ways and making something public or communal by exhibiting, publishing, et cetera. This can happen by way of a variety of practices – a fact that is often effaced from the institutionalized debate. I have arrived at important insights through design or manual processes, or because I failed at something. And the most important thing is to be able to move among different kinds of knowledge, build social relations, open spaces, make a different subjectivation possible, and so forth. All that is part of the sphere of action.

EE: The goals should be cognitive processes and critical engagement and not the accumulation of knowledge as a form of dead capital. The idea of an official knowledge often corresponds to thinking in disciplines. University curricula are designed to introduce students to the methodologies and habits of specific disciplines, rather than provide skills with practical applicability. That is where an artistic or creative praxis that serves as a cognitive process, in the way you have just described, is different. Moreover, the field of art – as a more or less autonomous sphere – can itself serve as a site for analysis and renegotiation between different interpretations and positions, for the possibility of experimental, interventive, and activist artistic praxis and research, if we want to describe it in these terms. That is the sort of praxis I would be interested in, and it is precisely not about objectifying, generalizing, standardizing, or quantifying a certain kind of universal knowledge.

PS: The way we as artists and cultural producers engage theory, too, tends to resemble a form of interference. We have read some things and been told about others or picked them up in discussions. Combining these with our own projects or with questions directly related to our actions produces new ideas, books, spaces, images, and projects. It was never about having read everything. In reality, things work in much more playful and fragmentary ways. What is central for us is that we identify with the issues and projects, that we stand behind them, are responsible for them, perhaps even have significant doubts about them, but that we are in any case willing to commit ourselves to them.

MvO: These practices have been under siege by the ongoing neoliberal educational interpellations for more than ten years. In the mid-1990s, I could still write with a very light hand about different forms of knowledge-production and collectivity of the sort developed, say, in exhibition projects. Now that has become difficult, since everyone's working lives are tied up with institutions in which a number of

antagonistic relationships also take shape.

PS: But that demonstrates even more clearly that all knowledge is situational or situated, that it comes into being in very specific social contexts and networks, in places where we are active, where we communicate, think, produce, and act, in the domains of activity through which we move. It is very difficult to translate these things into bureaucratized structures or curricula. At the same time, we should note that the universities themselves have also never produced anything but situational knowledge, which is to say, that they are specific with regard to their social context, their actions, and their social habits.

MvO: But in contrast to other contexts, this exclusive specific context has time and again been able to define how knowledge ought to be produced and which knowledge is relevant.

PS: Exactly! And that is also the source of the one-sided preference given to certain forms of knowledge. There are, in contexts defined by projects, very different forms of experience or references that would warrant greater reflection and study. For example, a certain sort of music has played a role, or certain works of art; we encountered all sorts of experts, on various levels; certain spaces and sites influenced the development of a project or became a central point of departure for new ideas and insights, et cetera. When the complex constellation of experiences, observations, and events that make up a specific everyday practice interacts in this way with theory on an ongoing basis, we will notice significant differences from the academic communication of knowledge, also as regards the results. There would certainly be more to it in the end than text production.

Constitute and Unite

MvO: If we place the focus on the contemporary praxis of the producers of culture and knowledge instead of on the educational institution, we arrive at different results. If it is recognized that knowledge has been and is being produced everywhere, that emancipatory knowledge is engendered outside the university or the academies, that cognitive processes of central importance are contained in manual activities as well, and not just in intellectual achievements, then that matches the idea of interpenetration, of immanent knowledge, and at once entails a different conception of praxis, as well as production. What emerges is a different understanding of the communal and the public and the erosion of the division between manual and intellectual production. Which is to say, we can recognize practices that counteract the institutional scarcity we talked about earlier, that are also points of reference for a

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postcapitalist politics.

PS: At their core, these are the central ideas of the emancipatory movements of the 1960s. Looking back at my school days, I have to say that these were also the ideas that provided me with strong arguments against all sorts of authorities in the family and the school, as well as against the social interpellations that pushed me to train for a respectable profession. No question: elementary schools, paperbacks, street fairs, and adventure playgrounds were all strategies of dissemination, of participation and self-empowerment. I find it interesting now to recognize that, under different social conditions, there are again possible ways to pick up where these movements left off, not only in theory but also in concrete action.

EE: Just as you have described it, we are experiencing an accelerating shift in the configuration of capitalist conditions. After the transformations of the past decades – from the postwar Fordism shaped by Social Democracy and Keynesianism to a neoliberal mode of government driven by financial markets – cracks are becoming apparent in today's neoliberalism, and not just since the financial crisis of 2008; which is to say, its social hegemony is crumbling. Whereas alternatives have in the past appeared

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highly unlikely, changes in the social, political, and cultural conditions have now become more conceivable. In her introduction, Marion proposes a general change of perspective, inquiring about a postcapitalist politics and praxis and more specifically about where such a politics and praxis are already taking place today. I think that is a very interesting approach. So where can we find a praxis of this sort, or the development of a sense of such postcapitalist possibility, in the praxis of knowledge and the artistic contexts we have discussed? Art that “operates in the domain of the political” would not be the least important space of contingency in which a political, social, and cultural imaginary, as well as new postidentitarian subjectivities, could take form. I have often wondered how the intensity of politicization, collectivity, debates, and counterpublics in various projects can be harnessed to create something sustainable in the long term that would in turn effect more concrete changes. But these changes are taking place; for what we do does something to us. A situated and postcapitalist praxis of knowledge is a process of transformation that proceeds step by step and changes the individuals in turn. Such a praxis is in motion and serves the abolition of putative



Materials of "Halle School of Common Property" at "Common Property - Allgemeingut," 6th Werkleitz Biennale Halle, 2004.

boundaries – be it in the emergence of a communist society within the capitalist one, i.e., in the progressive accumulation of the communal from the bottom up, as proposed by Hardt and Negri in *Commonwealth*; or in the conception of new communisms.

PS: I would propose that we conceive not only knowledge production but also learning itself as context-specific and situational, and think of it as much more separate from institutional structures. Quite patently, there are individual ways to proceed that respond to different initial situations, interests, and sets of problems: professional training, projects, starting a business, forming a band, traveling, internships, university studies, founding an institute, taking some time off, et cetera. The counter model against wasting resources on elite universities might be a generous “education allowance” in addition to a guaranteed basic income. Everyone would be entitled to it, at any age, and it would be deposited into their account as soon as they knew what to do with it.

MvO: The call for an unconditional basic income is of absolutely central importance. Only when my material conditions are secured am I able to do something that does not need to be paid for, that does not have a price and can be shared without having to become property. Without a different material and structural basis for our labor relations and living conditions, all fantasies of knowledge as a common good will remain farcical – they would amount to nothing more than yet another innovative variant of zombie neoliberalism and remain shaped by our dependency on the institutions of modernity.

FA: I would agree, as long as this basic income is in principle a global, which is to say, transnational, entitlement and covers the margin of subsistence beyond a reasonable degree; only then can we prevent the transformation of this demand into the rotten compromise of a national-chauvinist flat rate whose primary purpose would ultimately be to undo the Fordist tangle of social transfer payments. That this demand, easy to understand and generally desirable though it is, will not become global reality – it would undermine the international division of labor and the compulsion to sell one’s labor for the enrichment of others, and ultimately lead to the abolition of capitalism – would be a worldly answer to Philippe Van Parijs’s question, “Real Freedom for All: What (If Anything) Can Justify Capitalism?” The question of providing material security for learning processes aside, it seems important to me to emphasize the physical and affective quality of the difference that separates book knowledge from knowledge based on personal experience. A learning experience takes place in social

struggles that is accompanied by a considerable production of affect and knowledge. That, to my mind, was one of the most important achievements of the protest movement of 2009–10: not that specific demands were met, but rather that the active subjects related in different ways to themselves as well as to others, on both sides of the barricades, and continually displaced these barricades. Within the protest movement, questions such as how knowledge-production within and outside the university works were subjects of continuous discussion in working groups and workshops. One result of these discussions among many was the creation of the initiative for a Critical and Solidary University.¹ Other issues that came up were a so-called “Augustine Academy” (a structure conceived in collaboration with homeless people), and the understandable desire to bring together students, teachers, and researchers in artistic and scientific fields.

EE: Besides the unconditional call for a global basic income and social infrastructure (e.g., education) for everyone, then, there are also short-term demands that have emerged from our concrete and immediate context since the education protests during the winter of 2009–10. There is the demand that the spaces and infrastructures now controlled by student self-determination, such as the squatted auditoriums in Vienna and elsewhere, spaces where participants can exercise a postcapitalist praxis of knowledge, be retained and expanded. Study-ins as well as expanded open and interdisciplinary communities of teaching and learning, a more comprehensive self-organization of the precarized knowledge workers at the universities, support for leftist university networks and magazines, and the development of alternative avenues of access to the universities, and so forth – by now, such spaces are once again under threat of being forcibly cleared. An applied knowledge-production of this sort is a process that aims to abolish the current state of affairs, with its artificial scarcity.

MvO: That inevitably implies redistribution! A redistribution of resources, money, and spaces, that is to say, of the instruments for a different praxis, is necessary. I would primarily champion the idea of small steps instead of an all-for-all perspective. A start would be to conceive new trans-institutional structures in our work lives. That would be to take the situation with which we began – knowledge is being produced everywhere and by many actors, not just academics or artists – a lot more seriously. To my mind, this also means that we call the existing binary and hierarchical opposition between intra-institutional and extra-institutional

knowledge-production into question, in the existing public institutions and in our self-organized production.

PS: The demand for different conceptions of education – to the extent that we need to raise this demand at all – cannot be directed at the schools and universities alone. These institutions would have to gradually become sideshows – or better: become the places where, perhaps not unlike the internet, people can continually exchange and comment on the wealth of insights, experiences, and productions generated in all sorts of contexts.

MvO: So one central demand would be that everyone who needs emancipatory practical or theoretical knowledge has to get access to it, and not just those who have a qualifying high school diploma and wealthy parents. Which is the current situation. The working-men’s-club movement and the adult education center are just two examples that stand athwart the whole nonsense about Clusters of Excellence and elite universities. Creating different desires, desires for radically democratic practices and structures: that is something for which the cultural field would be a suitable place, because it lends itself to the articulation of wishes located at the center of social change. And I think that is roughly the conclusion at which we arrive when we debate “educational turns” and such. By contrast, little has happened in a structural sense, or by way of an “everyone is an expert” movement. So the small circles practicing alternative knowledge-production remain elite structures, if we do not engage in constituting inclusive conditions and openings for diverse actors and actions.

PS: To the extent that there is no way to do this without formalized structures backed by the state, one alternative to learning in institutions that might be interesting is a kind of mentoring program that would appeal to a great variety of people, both as teachers and as students. Such a program might do more to render the distinction between praxis and theory obsolete, or rather, make it a matter of context-specific needs.

MvO: Describing the city or even society as “our university” in order to render visible that the most diverse actors and cultures of knowledge interact and cooperate here might be a potential point of departure, allowing us to reflect much more on the contemporary composition of knowledge and culture and to operate in the actual relations of production.

PS: In any case, it is unacceptable that the institutions, no matter whether museums or universities, use our reputations and our knowledge – which we have worked for years to create in projects we have invented ourselves, in free and often massively underfinanced projects

– to bolster their profiles by, say, employing us for a few years; that they do not nearly offer us the conditions we would need to continue our work with comparable intensity; or that they ultimately deny that we have the qualifications we actually have. At the same time, it is also becoming clear that the thoroughly rationalized enterprises of the “cultural” and “educational industries,” designed to produce excellence in the most efficient way, have lost the capacity for anything but administration and marketing, and are thus becoming ever more dependent on precarized cultural producers and knowledge workers. This is exactly the point at which we need new organizations of our own that exert influence to ensure that, for example, the “reputational benefit” the institutions increasingly extract for their own internal expansion flows back into our projects and networks. For instance, we must form pools through which institutions can access our knowledge, our experience or reputation, but only receive it on loan and on our conditions; through which a share of all honorariums, project grants, royalties, and revenues flows into a communal fund that will provide independent financing for our research and our projects and, if need be, our livelihoods. So not another debate over “copyrights” or “intellectual property” – these are the strategies of the factory owners in the “creative industries.” Instead, toward greater solidarity, communal soup kitchens, and culture clubs. Knowledge producers of all disciplines, unite!

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Translated from the German by Gerrit Jackson.

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e-flux journal #17 — june-august 2010 Fahim Amir, Eva Eggermann, Marion von Osten, and Peter Spillmann
What Shall We Do...?

Fahim Amir is a Viennese theoretician and cultural producer with Afghan origins. Recently (2006/2007) he worked as dramatic adviser of *spiel:platz* at the dietheater Vienna. Here and elsewhere he realized artistic, theoretical, and post-disciplinary projects on self-organization and critique of society in contemporary artistic and cultural productions. He was guest professor in the class for post-conceptual arts practices at the Academy of Fine Arts (2005/2006). During this time, he worked on post-operaistic approaches, theories of governmentality, post- and neo-marxism. He is involved in various collaborative practices in the field of art, theory, and culture.

Eva Egermann is an artist based in Vienna. She is interested in aesthetic, theoretical and political practices that are aimed at disrupting normative regimes, and forms between artistic formats, social spatialization, and experimental text production. She has been working in various media and collectives, as in the framework of the Manoa Free University (www.manoafreeuniversity.org), the group *GirlsOnHorses*, within the magazine *MALMOE* (www.malmoe.org), or other individual collaborations. She is currently Assistant Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. Together with Anna Pritz she edited the two Publications *School Works* and *Class Works* in 2009 about pedagogical, artistic, and research practice. Together with Elke Krasny she is organizing the exhibition project “2 or 3 things we’ve learned, Intersections of Art, Pedagogy and Protest” that opens in September 2010 at the IG Bildende Kunst Gallery (www.igbildendekunst.at) in Vienna.

Marion von Osten works with curatorial, artistic and theoretical approaches that converge through the medium of exhibitions, installations, video and text productions, lecture performances, conferences, and film programs. Her main research interests concern the working conditions of cultural production in post-colonial societies, technologies of the self, and the governance of mobility. She is a founding member of Labor k3000, kpD (kleines post-fordistisches Drama), and the Center for Post-Colonial Knowledge and Culture, Berlin.

Peter Spillmann is an artist, researcher, and curator. He is a founding member of the media art collective Labor k3000 Zurich and the Center for Post-Colonial Knowledge and Culture, Berlin. Since 2006 he has been lecturer at the University of Applied Science and Arts, Lucerne. Among his latest projects are: “This-was-tomorrow.net” (2008-2010, Haus der Kulturen der Welt Berlin/ MACBA Barcelona / Museum Sztuki Wasaw), “Der Park” (2007, Kunstraum Lakeside Klagenfurt and MigMap), “Governing Migration” (2004-6), and “Projekt Migration” (Kölnischer Kunstverein).

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