Mockinstitutional Aesthetics: Building an Art Academy From Below? *

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> *The Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it.*
>
> Jose Luis Borges[1]

For over fifteen years a series of critical, artist-driven pedagogical initiatives on the southwest side of Chicago has been turning the city into a learning tool for public high school students. Nomadic Studio and the Pedagogical Factory are just two of dozens of programs that emerged out of Jim Duignan's Stockyard Institute, an informal learning center that brings artists together with students in order to develop temporary collaborative projects. These include Cafeteria Sessions, in which young people gathered in the school cafeteria to record their experiences as a source for developing curriculum fine-tuned to the adolescent worlds; a community radio station housed in a "tent school" called Urbs in Horto developed in collaboration with the late Chicago artist Michael Piazza; a public *gps* signboard that read "Don't Mess with My Fro" located atop a taxicab sponsored by the artist's group HAHA; and an imaginary tourist bureau co-designed by Davion Mathews that functioned as an traveling oral history of the Austin neighborhood where the Stockyard Institute is located. Duignan has also forged ties with the University of Hip Hop and AREA Chicago (Art/Research/Education/Activism), the latter a publishing and networking platform dedicated to strengthening social justice campaigns and educational innovation throughout the city and mid-west region. At the same time the Stockyard Institute's city-specific program fits into an emerging pattern of research-based art projects that appear to have sprung up around the globe as orthodox and alternative models of education have been dismantled by entrepreneurial capitalism. Its as if in a world of deterritorialized space, privately owned ideas, and collapsed communities only a combination of aesthetic intervention and mimetic play can hope to reinvent the salvage society, doing so from the bottom up through a is The Stockyard Institute is one such community from below. It also has the distinction of proving its sustainability in one of the nation's most economically and socially challenged inner-city neighborhoods. And yet at the heart of this tactical sustainability is a paradox involving an age-old artistic practice that has frightened the managers of law and order at least since the days of Socrates.
Plato sternly warns us about artistic mimicry. He tells us that Socrates barred imitative poets and painters from his Republic.[2] Artists don't do honest work; they merely represent the work of other laborers.

** This is a modified excerpt from the last chapter of Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture, Gregory Sholette (Pluto Press, 2010). It was generated for a catalog about the Stockyard Institute.*

[1] Jose Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science," in *Collected Fictions,* Andrew Hurley, trans., (Penguin Books, 1999), 320.
[2] Plato, *The Republic,* translated by Benjamin Jowett, [World Publishing Co. 1946, 136. [I'm not sure this fn is necessary] [agreed]

An image of a chair is three times removed from the ideal chair. The first facsimile is that of the carpenter, and yet at least the carpenter's chair can be used for sitting. The artist's feeble, third order representation is useless. Worse still, with its fantastic, imitative relationship to the truth, an artwork easily misleads citizens (unlike say, the work of logicians and philosophers). But there is something else in this art of deception that jeopardizes the very order of the Republic. As philosopher Jacques Rancière elaborates: "The carpenter, baker, shoemaker, blacksmith, all must remain tied to their stations in life. The 'office' of the artist, however, is ambiguous. It is like a phantom profession, one that permits the artist to simultaneously work and not work, to have a 'real' job, and to have a fictional job. And nothing is more subversive than showing other workers the pleasure of not engaging in productive labor." [3] Thanks to this labor of dissimulation, artists slide between social barriers; even moving between class distinctions so as to "pass" for what they are not. In Socrates' time artists replicated the works of manual laborer –chairs, bread, shoes, horses' bridles. Today artists imitate a product particular to the post-industrial economy: the administrative, affective, and intellectual power of institutions. For in spite of increased artistic censorship and self-censorship in the wake of the security measures introduced after 9/11, and notwithstanding the acute economic uncertainty brought on by the 2008-09 financial collapse, there is one quintessential skill-set that sets artists apart from most other laborers. It is a unique aptitude that provides an edge when dealing with the society of risk, beyond the long-standing adaptation to structural precariousness and overproduction. In addition to a propensity for flexible work patterns, gift-sharing networks, and nonlinear problem solving, artists possess a sophisticated ability to mimic, exaggerate, or otherwise reshape given reality.[4] This is indeed a confidence game. However, it involves a representational mimicry not directed towards material objects as in Plato's day, but instead towards the intangible realm of organizational signification and embodiment The imitative artist Socrates warned of now takes up the bits and pieces of derelict institutions and failed states, transforming these into a virtual, if strangely informal second-order substitute for the social itself. The map and what it maps are superimposed upon one another.

The past thirty years have witnessed a curious mimicry at work within the shoals and shallows of enterprise culture.[5] A n assortment of ersatz institutes, centers, schools, bureaus, offices, laboratories, leagues, departments, societies, clubs, and bogus corporations have inserted themselves into the de-territoralized space of the spectacular global marketplace. Each of these mock-institutional entities sports its own logo, mission, and website, engaging in a process of self-branding not so much aimed at niche markets or product

[3] Rancière puts it this way, "Plato states that artisans [as opposed to imitative artists] cannot be put in charge of the shared or common elements of the community because they do *not have the time* to devote themselves to anything other than their work. They cannot be somewhere else because *work will not wait*" (Ranciere's italics). Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* Continuum Books, 2004), 12, 13.

[4] Perhaps the only other group who make essential use of this imitative practice are frauds, counterfeiters, grifters, and confidence men, although some would argue, not without warrant, that politicians and preachers belong on this list.

[5] The reference is to De Certeau's Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* English trans. Steen Rendall, University of California Press, Los Angeles, London, 1984, Authors Introduction: xix and xx.

loyalty but rather to gain surreptitious entry into visibility itself (although significantly these maneuvers typically provide art-world positioning whether intended or not). The most engaging of these phantom establishments do more than just replicate the appearance of lost liberal, institutional structures, they also use their virtual offices to confront and intervene within the real-world of actual corporations, businesses, municipalities, and states. The Yes Men embody stereotypical business executives with such monochromatic precision they gain access to "real" corporate conferences, press events, and mass media coverage; the Center for Tactical Magic mixes together Wicca paganism and interventionist maneuvers in an effort to achieve "positive social transformation;" and Chicago-based Temporary Services personify municipal civil servants. Both on and offline Critical Art Ensemble, Carbon Defense League, and the Institute for Applied Autonomy develop open source "hacks" and reverse-engineer technologies for retrofitting computers, public spaces, and genetically modified foods, all in the name of greater self-determination. In Southern California the Los Angeles Urban Rangers are not official park rangers, but rather a group of artists and cultural activists who organize unofficial "safaris" focused on urban policy and environmental justice in a city segmented by highways, onramps, and concrete islands There is even a counterfeit religious congregation, the Church of Stop-Shopping, presided over by a faux preacher, the performance artist Bill Talen, a.k.a. the Reverend Billy. Yet even if these acts of self-visualization and sham-signification are intended to negate, subvert, or "reverse engineer" the society of the spectacle, they nevertheless are conceivable today only because of its de-territorialized networks. There is also a profound sense of uselessness and redundancy; the phenomenon of mock institutionalism thrives best within a failed society where previous forms of human connectivity have been left in tatters. In a slightly different context the collective Retort commented that the counter-globalization "movement of movements is as much a product of 'statelessness' as it is the critique of it."[6] So too does a certain dark matter respond by embracing its own redundancy through overt acts of self-creation and mythification. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine this level of social hacking taking place prior to the collapse of the Keynesian paradigm of administered society whose intellectual and artistic banalities Adorno resolutely railed against. Prior to the rise of post-Fordist enterprise culture, the notion of a broader public good was drilled into the population from birth to old age. Today, when every individual is in a constant state of warfare with every other individual, only a radically failed society could give birth to hyperbolic fantasies of triumphant communality and mock-institutional pragmatism.

This convergence of a need to fill the gap left by a missing society and a rising sense that formal educational institutions merely prepare students to live life as a massive debt-ridden surplus has given rise to a series of pedagogical experiments now taking place across the globe. Some of these projects are carried out by individuals who find their own presumably sophisticated education suddenly lacking. Others openly

[6] Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in the New Age of War*, [place] Verso, 2005, 193.

reject what in the United Kingdom is referred to by neoliberal policy wonks as enterprise teaching or entrepreneurial learning, or in the United States as the very theft of life itself through a pedagogical system turned graveyard. For example, a grim 2009 communiqué from students occupying the campus of the University of California at Berkeley reads in part,

> Incongruous architecture, the ghosts of vanished ideals, the vista of a dead future: these are the remains of the university…like the society to which it has played the faithful servant, the university is bankrupt. This bankruptcy is not only financial. It is the index of a more fundamental insolvency, one both political and economic, which has been a long time in the making.[7]

The manifestos from occupied Berkeley and communiqués from ”an absent future” reflect both the threatened state of education at the turn of the century as well as its potential rebirth. For two months in late 2009, Austrian students occupied the University of Vienna, demanding the abolition of tuition fees, improved working conditions for faculty and staff, and greater democracy throughout the nation's educational system. They were evicted. But in the early hours of December 22 they began organizing new protests in front of the university, using digital networks to coordinate flash-mobs: large groups of people who suddenly converge and disperse at a set time in a particular public space as set by an email, Twitter, or cell phone text message, essentially the same technique Iranian demonstrators use to mobilize opposition to the government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Several months earlier students at the New School in New York City occupied for the second time in 2009 the privately-owned university cafeteria. Barricaded inside, they demanded the resignation of New School president Bob Kerry, a strong advocate of the Iraq war and of neoliberal education reform. They were violently evicted by police using caustic pepper spray, but their actions, along with those of the faculty union and school administrators, appear to have forced Kerry to announce he would not seek a new contract at the end of his term in 2011.

The dramatic occupations and protests that have swept across the University of California school system following deep budget cuts will no doubt spread as the global financial crisis deepens. It appears that many who labor in or who are being “processed” by the neoliberal *edufactory* system have begun to mutiny, and the new structural adjustment initiated by the 2008/09 “great recession” is beginning to serve as a focusing agent for this rebellion. What's more, theories of tactical urbanism, cultural intervention, and institutional

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[7] Communiqué from an Absent Future, critical theory and content from the nascent California student occupation movement, September 24, 2009: http://wewanteverything.wordpress.com/2009/09/24/communique-from-an-absent-future/

impersonation go hand in hand with this new campus insurgency in which artists, neoliberalism's favorite knowledge proletariat, are playing a key research and development role.

In Los Angeles a group of artists have established their own DIY teaching platform called the Public School. The project, developed by several artists, consists of an online program that allows participants to design classes they want to take but can't find elsewhere, from practical, technology-related workshops to theoretical seminars. Once enough students register for a particular course, an appropriate instructor is hired to teach it, and a modest fee is charged for each seminar. Though there is no municipal or government support for this educational project, the school's chosen name is simultaneously a straightforward reference to its internal democratic structure but also a speech act that calls the bluff of the actual failed public school system in California. Since its inauguration a few years ago independent clones of the Public School have emerged in New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Brussels, Paris, and San Juan. [8] On the East Coast, a new art academy mixes intensifying economic fears brought on by the financial meltdown together with efforts to critically reimagine art education. The Bruce High Quality Foundation (BHQF) –notably another ersatz institutional identity that is not a foundation any more than there is anyone named Bruce High Quality– has launched the Bruce High Quality Foundation University (BHQFU).[9] The school's online manifesto, possibly making a reference to another manifesto called The Coming Insurrection in France, begins with the stormy words: "Something's got to give. The $200,000-debt-model of art education [in the US] is simply untenable." The new university's mission adds that the education artists are "getting for their money is mired in irrelevance,"[10] That irrelevant quagmire is furthermore described as "blind romanticism and a blind professionalism," an academic zeitgeist BHQFU insists has been waging a false battle for the hearts and minds of contemporary art students. [11] One informally structured pedagogical experiment has, much like the Stockyard Institute, been ongoing for many years. Located in Manhattan's financial district16 Beaver Street (16B) is both the address and the moniker of an open-ended reading group in which participants meet weekly to discuss texts, listen to visiting scholars and artists, and watch videos related to topics of interest from Palestinian rights to neoliberalism. Despite its ten-plus years of programming 16B has never metamorphosed into a full-blown legal entity and yet has proven miraculously enduring.[12] Funding for events, and for the loft spacehas largely depended on subletting part of the room to a commercial artist, as well as untold hours of in-kind labor provided by members and supporters. Meanwhile, the roster of pedagogical art experimentation grows. Along with The

[8] The Public School in Los Angeles is part of the Telic institute alternative art center, but all other "branch" locations are autonomous from it, see: http://the-flog.com/2008/03/the-public-school-at-telic/
[9] See the BHQF 'Prolegomena To Any Future Art School' manifesto at: http://bhqf.org/Site/about.html ,
[10] Compare the BHQF to the opening lines of the book *The Coming Insurrection*, which begins: "Everyone agrees. It's about to explode," by the Invisible Committee, Semiotext (e) books, 2009.
[11] The nineteenth-century origins of the art educational "factory" in the Unites States are neatly mapped out in Howard Singerman's opening chapters of *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, [University of California Press, 1999.
[12] 16 Beaver Street has avoided seeking not-for-profit (NFP) status or tax exemption even though the group's established programming record as an New York cultural institution would likely make them a grant magnet.

Stockyard Institute, 16 Beaver Street, The Public School, and Bruce High Quality Foundation University: we can add such initiatives as Red76's Laundry Lecture Series in Portland, Oregon; the School of Decreative Methodologies at Basekamp space in Philadelphia; The Baltimore Free School; Learning Site in Copenhagen; the School of Missing Studies in the Balkans; and artist Nils Norman's University of Trash and Exploding School projects in the US and Denmark. There is even a report of a clandestine "art school" that takes place behind the tenth-floor elevator room at St. Martins in London. A provisional simulation of institutional agency appears to be unfolding, step by awkward step. As in Borges's map, the virtual and actual appear to converge. And although Adorno once railed against the intellectual and artistic banalities of administered culture in the post-War era, perhaps it has become necessary to occupy the shell of that former society by reassembling its debris into a shield that is also a practical tool for survival. After all, this accumulation of cultural detritus is our shared history, our archive of knowledge and potential liberation. As the students in occupied Berkeley grimly acknowledge "this accumulation—every once in a while interrupted, violated by a riot, a wild protest, unforgettable fucking, the overwhelming joy of love, life shattering heartbreak—is a muted, but desirous life. A dead but restless and desirous life." Still, one question now faces us above all others: how to prevent this emerging pedagogical experimentation and Do It Yourself (DIY) institutionalism from becoming part of what the students in occupied UC Berkeley dub the "Necrosocial," a world suited only for the living dead. Duignan's Stockyard Institute offers one model for how improvisation and informality can be sustained in a learning situation over time.