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Under Trees
The "Third School": Changing our perception around education
by Rebekka Kiesewetter (Depot Basel)

In his 1971 classic, Deschooling Society, Ivan Illich stated that "present educational institutions are at the service of the teacher's goals. The relational structures we need are those which will enable each man to define himself by learning and by contributing to the learning of others"(1)
Despite the words of thinkers such as Illich and an increasingly widespread concern with the commodification, privatization and commercialisation of knowledge, the discussion on alternative forms of education still evolves within surprisingly conventional boundaries. The fact that in an academic context, concepts such as efficiency, visibility, marketability and consensus have become the benchmarks for institutional as well as personal and professional success, is often neglected.

We tend to ignore that both institutions and individuals have internalised a profit-driven mind-set, expressed in through their vocabulary and actions; meetings between creative professionals, such as symposia, panels and discussions, often see speakers trying to cement their own positions, emphasizing the exceptional quality of their knowledge, thereby reinforcing the disciplinary boundaries and hierarchies shackling our working environment. They act as competitors, in a push for what increasingly looks like market differentiation. In this context we are reduced to the position of producers of value in a fictional and distorted knowledge economy. Illich describes this process lucidly in the context of education:

"The (…) curriculum (…) is a bundle of planned meanings, a package of values, a commodity whose 'balanced appeal' makes it marketable to a sufficiently large number to justify the cost of production. Consumer-pupils are taught to make their desires conform to marketable values. Thus they are made to feel guilty if they do not behave according to the predictions of consumer research by getting

the grades and certificates that will place them in the job category they have been led to expect." (2)

Depot Basel, Forum. Credits: Harold Dede

Challenging this reality immediately forces us to question our position in the system: we criticize institutions from within, wish to replace them and often – bereft of the ability to imagine something that goes beyond prevalent conventions and terminologies – fall into the trap of reproducing its core

mechanisms of governance under slightly different terms. We must recognize that criticism from within can only result in an illusive aloofness within affiliation to the system: "Critique seeks to limit and legitimate the very crisis under critique, instead of specualtively leave it behind," (3) as Armen Avanessian puts it. Although it is clear that the kind of behaviour and output the system demands of us no longer corresponds to our desires and conditions, is the strategy of threatening educational institutions to initiate their own change really worth pursuing? Maintaining this trajectory always results in failure: the contradictions of the system cannot be overcome as they will always be resolved internally by the shape-shifting qualities of the system itself. It is impossible, I believe, to dissociate entirely from the system, as we still need it as much as it needs us. It supports us, enables us, keeps us alive.

How, then, can one resist the de-socializing forces of the system while remaining so attached to it? First of all I suggest that we stop placing our "hopes for salvation" in this system. We should direct our aims to act responsibly – in a political sense – and freely away from forms of acting which are so

vulnerable to commodification. And by taking distance from connecting our need for recognition to an ultimately capitalist reward system.

If we allow this distance, we can deliberately, albeit temporarily occupy what I will refer to as "Heterotopias"(4) or "Third Spaces," (5) a concept dear to post-colonialist theory. These spaces, which can be either mentally constructed or physical, should be understood as a synthesis or hybrid of the internal and external regions of a system, combining and separating the positions of both. These spaces do not aim to replace or to stand in explicit opposition to the system, but to act both as disruptor and as a mediator. We have to create spaces that provide the shelter needed to experiment outside of the time-frames and impositions on content required within the system. Only by setting up these spacial and mental realities will we find a real and tangible place for recovery and from the system's pressure; A place for pre-consideration, re-thinking, re-disputing themes in an in-depth manner which the prevalent system cannot foster.

Mons Invisible – Jardin Suspendu, Agora.
Credits: Rebekka Kiesewetter

In this pursuit let's think about a school or rather an educational framework, which does not replace formal education or our engagement within the system, but complements it. Let's dismiss the idea that schools are places where students strive towards diplomas and degrees, and let's forget about prevalent concepts of knowledge

distribution and reception. Rather let's start to think about schools in the way Michael Paraskos did:

"We might well say that if four individuals gather together under a tree that is a school. Similarly four individuals around a kitchen table. Or four individuals in the café or bar. By redefining the school in this way we also redefine what it means to be a student in a school or a teacher (....) who work together not for meaningless pieces of paper that certify someone is something, but in a search for experiences." (6)

Think about moments of conversation made for the conversation's sake, which might unfold in the most diverse environments (whether professional or not). Think of occasions where the exchange between people, who often barely know each other, but are connected by shared interests, mutual convictions and goals, through inter-subjective closeness and sympathy, through an empathic way of seeing the world. Consider moments of unobstructed empathy; those instances in between, before, after different kinds of professional gatherings; when people with common interests and

professional motivations share less careful, more politically charged opinions. The ties created in these "off-the-radar" encounters, prove to be stronger and deeper than those made as career choices, or those induced by the affiliation to the same discipline or by a project's requirements. This is because the connections I am referring to, are based on the metrics of incorruptible foundations such as empathy, solidarity, mutual understanding and friendship. In a so-called private environment, those friendly encounters or basic affiliations are often self-evident, even taken for granted. In a professional environment they can be personally and professionally liberating, psychically enriching and full of joy.
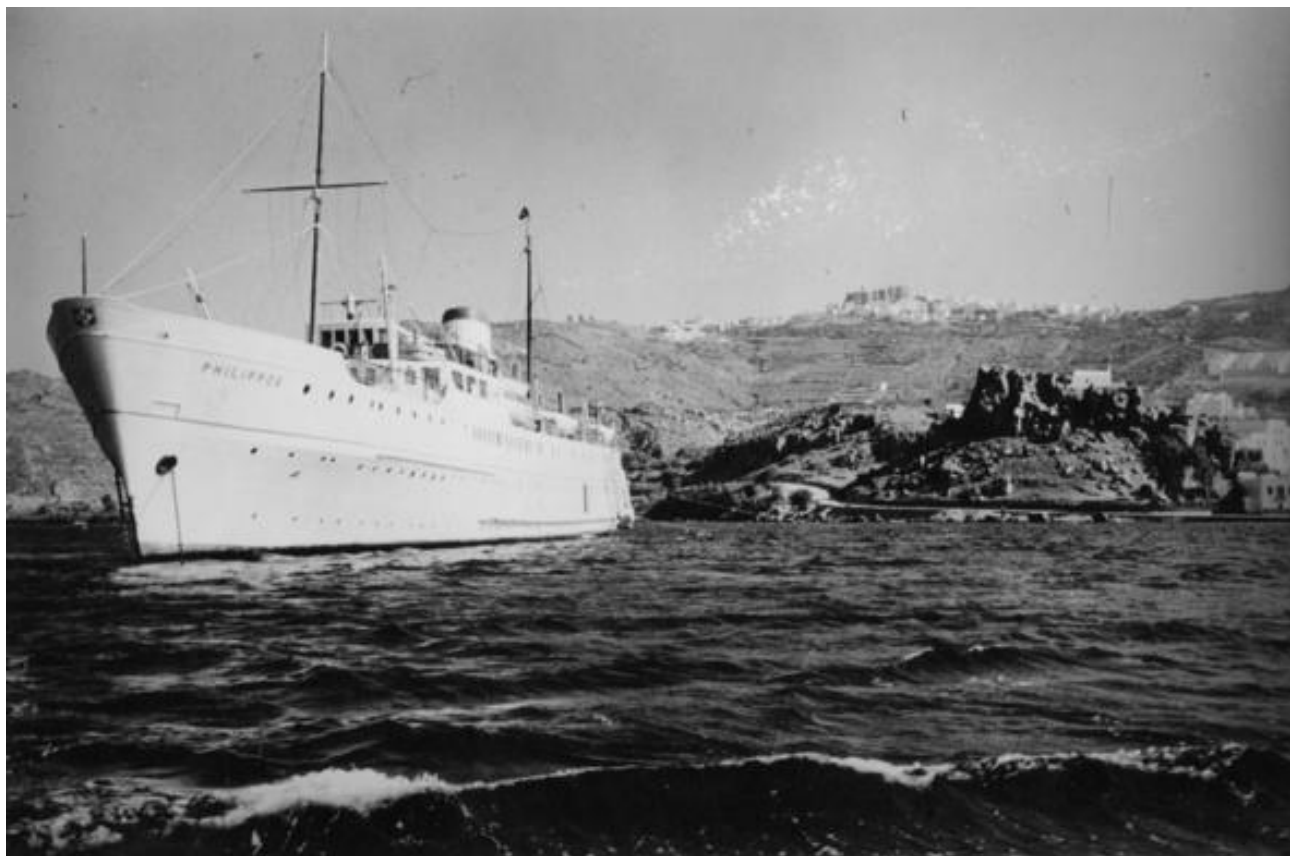
There is a rich history of educational experiments attempting to foster and exploit these kind of ties, groups and initiatives such as the Bloomsbury circle around Virginia Woolf and John Maynard Keynes in the first half of the 20th century, or the series of Delos Symposions hosted by Constantinos Doxiadis on his yacht in the 1970s.

These experiences have become rarer, due also to a growing atomisation of society and we have forgotten how to acknowledge the value of those encounters. SCEPSI institute

attempts to be an exception. As Franco Berardi, the founder of SCEPSI states: "When solidarity is broken and competition becomes the rule, research and discovery are disconnected form pleasure (...), they are instruments for economic competition." (7)

(http://www.aformalacademy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/3_Bloomsbury_Circle.
The Bloomsbury circle.

DELOS Symposion Yacht. Credits: Constantinos and Emma Doxiadis Foundation, Athens.

Especially in our professional environments, we have lost the ability to cherish shared moments, being together. We see those encounters "off-the-radar" as mere by-products of our paid activity. Regardless of how much our actions ultimately are influenced by those encounters, regardless how many benefits we derive from them, our

measure of success and value for our work remains the prevalent one. The value generated by the social sphere remains untapped. I propose ceasing to consider "personal worth" as a mere by-product of paid activity, and realize that those benefits at least equal monetary ones and in fact co-exist with them synergically. And we must recognize that this interdependence is an advantage and privilege of tour form of practice.

So let's think of our school as a prolonged "off-radar encounter," let's re-align our value systems to fit our true needs and creating occasions for strengthening the bonds between us and developing entirely new ways of understanding our professions, motivations and practice. Let's shift our values away from the system's prevalent evaluation criteria, away from considering income, position in a hierarchy and visibility as synonyms for success, let's recalibrate our orientation. We must discard appearances, budgets, time frames, numbers, utility, disciplines, marketability, seemingly objective despair and pessimism, the notion of knowledge distribution, diplomas and so on – and shift our metrics towards our very own stellar system.

Let's think of our school as a constellation formed by interpersonal relationships rather than by imposed institutional structures; As a place bringing back the sense of joy and the benefits (besides money) that should be inherent in the pursuit of our practices. Let's see our classes as prolongations of those moments in between, as gatherings of like-minded individuals, laughing, eating, working and thinking together, sharing ideas. I suggest we no longer let ourselves be driven by the desire for an institutional career or a higher position on a hierarchical ladder. Our reward system should be an economy of sharing acts and thoughts. In order to make our innate affiliations the base of our bonds and actions. Humanity, subjectivity, absurdity, ephemerality, the refusal of utilitarianism, shared hope, empathy and friendship (which formal education is in dire need of) should become the base and direct our behaviour and ethics. We will find recognition as individuals, not as art historians, journalists or curators.

Schools like these would be accessible to everyone, but not attract everybody. The sense of belonging (or not) will function as an internal selection system. As Svetlana Boym pointed out: "Friendship is an elective affinity

without finality, a relationship without plot or place in our society, an experience for its own sake. Friendship is not always democratic or egalitarian, but rather selective and not entirely inclusive."(8) I would add that thesame is true for empathy.

The grid we use to determine value, directions and orientation is fluid, and necessarily an issue of on-going conflict, contradiction and thus negotiation. Its appearance will depend on what we do, where and for whom it is developed. Our bonding should be intuitively rhizomatic, in the sense of Deleuze's and Guattari's schizo-nomadic existence9: it can escape the social constraints of a fixed identity. Combining an arbitrary point with other arbitrary points, it can connect very heterogeneous elements. In these compounds, there are no subjects or objects. The rhizome is not a unit, rather it is made up of moving directions. It has neither beginning nor end, however, it has a center from which it spreads. Thus, a rhizome can be broken or torn at any point and still continue on other lines further.

dpr-berlin. Credits: dpr-barcelona

Every individual can become a school, free to assemble in whichever form with other individuals. The rhizomatic grass roots effect of impromptu schools springing up, will have a viral effect in its own means, thus we should not strive to institutionalise or make it reach the "masses". The collectivity and "togetherness," which we have to seek and value, is not that of a "we-all", but that of an every-one-of-us. Here I refer to Kai van Eikels10, who speaks of the importance of

acting and thinking in a collective paradigm, made of constellations that exist and evolve without having to manifest their existence through forming a party, a group or a movement; he also points out that most of these constellations exist without the individuals even knowing that they are a part of a collective body. These writings describe forms of collectivity, whose dynamics are based on the separation between the respective individuals. In these collective forms, the gap between separated individual action is described as a blank space, through which individual acts can synchronize and support each other in their realization and effects. The consequence of such seemingly loose constellations can also be pictured by the physical phenomenon of the quantum entanglement, where groups of individuals (physical particles) interact in ways such that the quantum state of each individual cannot be described independently - instead, a quantum state may be given for the system as a whole.

If we think about the school as simply a place where individuals meet and discuss, a school which can pop up everywhere, there won't be any spatial requirements and specificities to

be fulfilled to realise them. So let's not search for the spectacular, the shiny buildings, the overblown promises of curricula, the technologically advanced libraries and the smart studios, let's cherish instead what is already here; let's treasure the intimate, let's open our homes, studios, and book shops. Still we must continue performing our jobs within the system - building structures, presenting researches or writing texts -, as acts of agency, inspired, fuelled and directed by our endeavors outside the system, we will be able to flood the system's outdated framework with new content, break open encrusted structures and terminologies and re-purpose them, transforming what is commonly perceived as weakness into strength. This would allow our schooling to slowly rearrange its value systems, which may be less cemented than they appear.

This is where also intiatives such as Aformal Academy take on very important roles: "We do not want to substitute institutional higher education. as citizens we should pay taxes and be critical and act politically for a better education. As researchers, right now, our role is to discover, connect and try to provide funds to alternative ways to undestand the

city. We should create bridges between informal experiments and institutions and try to make them known to everyone willing to learn and teach. Learning not only 'from' but also 'for' and 'within' the city", says Salvatore Peluso.

Let us then cherish also the privileges our professional environment allows us, let's benefit from our digital networks, our positions as teachers, curators and recipients of funding, Let's use those parts of our budgets, whose use we don't need to justify to our clients to create and foster spaces. Let's initiate schools: Be it in cities or the countryside, outside or inside, just for a few hours a week or full time. We have to anchor the necessity of fostering and mantaining schools in our consciousness, make it a part of our agendas, a habit, a need and an obligation. Maintaining this shared objective is to be the common base of our endeavours, how we get there is up to each and every one of us.

Notes:
(1) Illich, Ivan. 1971. Deschooling Society. New York: Harper & Row, 72.
(2) Ibid., 63.

(3) Avanessian, Armen (Ed.). 2013. #Akzeleration. Berlin: Merve, 71-77. (https://www.academia.edu/4779206/Criticism_ (Accessed 2016-01-20)

(4) Foucault, Michel. 1971. The Order of Things. New York: Vintage Books.

(5) e.g. Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. The Location of Culture. London: Routledge.

(6) Paraskos, Michael. "TheTable Top Schools of Art," in: Paraskos, Michael. 2015. Four Essays on Art and Anarchism. Mitcham: Orage Press, #3.

(7) Ivison, Tim; Vandeputte, Tom (Ed.). 2013. Contestations. Learning from Critical Experiments in Education. London: Bedfordpress, 38.

(8) Boym, Svetlana. 2009. "Scenography of Friendship," in: Cabinet Magazine, Issue 36. (http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/36/boy (Accessed 2016-01-20)

(9) Deleuze, Gilles; Guattari, Felix. 1987. Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

(10) van Eikels, Kai. 2013. Die Kunst des Kollektiven. Performance zwischen Theater, Politik und Sozio-Ökonomie. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 12–15.