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The Immaterialization of Art Education's Labor: Disciplined-Based Knowledge Production and the 1965 Penn State Seminar

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Abstract: This paper situates the 1965 Penn State Seminar within the post-industrial turn in the United States and examines how the emerging disciplinary framework for art education that reconfigured the content of art curricula from manual activities to cognitive capacities reflected the changing landscape of work in the American society. Drawing from Maurizio Lazzarato's concept of immaterial labor, I propose that the 1965 Seminar helped to set new criteria for art education's labor that put the emphasis on immaterial practices of art education. I focus specifically on two sets of criteria: one proposed by art educator Manuel Barkan and the other articulated by Allan Kaprow, the only artist who was invited to speak in the seminar. I suggest that they both, in their own ways, made it possible to imagine the outcomes of art education beyond its manifestations as therapeutic and/or self-expressive objects and turn it into a social and economic relation that ensured the need for art education in a society where the very nature of work was changing.

Keywords: immaterial labor; art education; Allan Kaprow; Manuel Barkan;

Ten years before the 1965 Penn State seminar, Manuel Barkan (1955) noted in the introduction of his book *A Foundation for Art Education* that “[a]rt in general education is becoming less a body of subject matter composed of certain specific skills, and more a way of working and a way of seeing” (p. 4). While this statement was not entirely alien to the Lowenfeldian framework of creative self-expression, the ambitious title of his book suggested that the “way of working” and the “way of seeing” denoted activities that have identifiable



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foundations that go *beyond* individual expression (e.g. child art) or “specific skills” (e.g. Arthur Wesley Dow’s elements and principles). In the 1965 Seminar, Barkan furthered this claim by stating,

there are *controls* operating in competent works by artists, critics and others engaged in art; and to this important extent, they engage in *structured inquiry which is disciplined*. Hence, though there is no *formal* structure in the arts, they are a certain class of disciplines. To this extent, too, inquiry into art curriculum can be both structured and disciplined, and so can the curriculum itself.” (Barkan, 1966, p. 244, emphasis mine)

This paper situates Barkan’s words, together with the 1965 Seminar itself, to the changing landscape of work in the United States at that time, that is, the so-called post-industrial turn that shifted the focus of economic productivity from the production of goods to the increasingly growing service economy. Here, I reflect on curator Helen Molesworth’s (2003) argument that various practices of American post-World War II avant-garde art (specifically practices that involved deskilling of artistic work) were highly involved with rethinking artistic labor in this new landscape of work. Molesworth argues, “[t]he liberation of art from traditional artistic skills, the production of a unique object, and the primacy of the visual necessitated new aesthetic criteria less focused on appearance and more concerned with ideas” (p. 29). These words bear intriguing similarities with Barkan’s claims concerning art education in the 1950s: rather than a set of “specific skills,” art education had become a “way” of *working* and *seeing* in a similar way that art became “less focused on appearance and more concerned with ideas.” While the “new aesthetic criteria” that Molesworth mentions can be seen as one of the central issues of debate in contemporary art (both in practice and theory), I see that Barkan’s seminal claims concerning the “structured” and “disciplined” approach to art curriculum constituted “new criteria” for art education: it helped to approach art education beyond the production of objects and treat it also as a process of *knowledge production*.

My investigation is fuelled by the ongoing discussion concerning the position of art in the current social, political, and economic milieu of education. The current neoliberal return to creativity (expressed in discourses that emphasize the importance of innovation and imagination for economy) has made art education, yet again, an intriguing companion for economic growth and productive labor. If, as one of National Art Education Association’s slogans states, art educators “Shape Human Potential,” (National Art Education Association, n.d.) I see that it is important to examine how the aforementioned new criteria might have contributed to the way that human potential and agency that we “shape” have become relevant for economic growth today.

Interestingly enough, creativity was also part of the discursive landscape from which the 1965 Seminar emerged. It is well known that the launch of Sputnik in 1957 had a strong effect on the educational policies in the United States. While the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 increased the federal support mostly for mathematics and sciences, August Heckscher’s *The Arts and National Government* (1963), commissioned by the Kennedy administration, accompanied by the nomination of Francis Keppel as the U.S. Commissioner of Education in 1962 and Kathryn Bloom’s nomination as the head of the newly established Arts and Humanities program in 1963, opened the doors for significant federal support for

research in art education in the 1960s (Hoffa, 1970). According to Vincent Lanier (1963), it was possible to articulate the societal need for art education within this early 1960s post-Sputnik era along the following line of reasoning:

United States scientists need to be creative.
Art education can develop creativity.
The United States needs art education.
(Lanier, 1963, p. 13)

It is crucial to point out, however, that this approach to creativity already differed quite radically from what one finds in creative self-expression of the 1940s and 1950s. In his article “Transition in Art Education: Changing Conceptions of Curriculum Content and Teaching,” Barkan (1962) noted that while creative self-expression had helped art educators to do away with rigid formalism, it had also made artistic practice too disconnected from the intellectual capabilities involved in this practice. He wrote, “in trying to bring art education to all people, well meaning but overzealous art teachers have themselves made learning in art *appear* to be all too *simple*, all too *easy*, and all too much *fun*” (Barkan, 1962, p. 13, original emphasis). Echoing similar sentiments, Joshua C. Taylor (1966) noted in his address at the 1965 Seminar that “[i]n educational programs the theories of John Dewey were bizarrely distorted to support the idea that art could be studied only through the act of production. ‘Creativity’ became the virtuous catch-word, and it was largely restricted to the activity of the hands” (p. 44).

“Too simple,” “too easy,” “too much fun,” and too restricted to “production” as “the activity of the hands.” Art education in the 1960s was to become more than mere entertainment, therapy, or manual labor: it was to exceed the confinements of individual artworks and become a system of knowledge production in a society where, as Heckscher (1963) noted, the increasing amount of free time “contributed to the search for a new dimension of experience and enjoyment” (p. 96).

What follows is a proposal for a frame of contextualization that looks at the legacy of the 1965 Seminar as new criteria for art education’s labor; criteria that put the emphasis on knowledge production as the immaterial practice of art education. I will focus on two sets of criteria: the one proposed by Barkan and the other articulated by Allan Kaprow, the only artist who was invited to speak in the seminar. I propose that they both, in their own ways, made it possible to imagine the outcomes of art education beyond its manifestations as therapeutic and/or self-expressive objects and turn it into a social and/or economic *relation* that ensured the need for art education in a society where the very nature of work was changing.

Immaterialization of Labor

The term “immaterial labor” is often connected to Italian sociologist and philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato, who has used it to describe the changing nature of work in contemporary Western capitalism that he (among other theorists connected to the Italian *Autonomia* movement) calls post-Fordism. Lazzarato defines immaterial labor as “labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity” (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 133). These two aspects refer to characteristics of contemporary labor that, on the one hand, requires an

increasing amount of information technology in its execution (informational content) and, on the other hand, exceeds the confinements of traditional work by being involved in “defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion” (p. 133). What is important to note about Lazzarato’s conceptualization of immaterial labor is that it “produces first and foremost a ‘social relationship’ (a relationship of innovation, production, and consumption)” (p. 138) which means that social life becomes increasingly connected with capital accumulation. “If Fordism integrated consumption into the cycle of the reproduction of capital,” Lazzarato writes, “post-Fordism integrates communication into it” (p. 140). This blurs the boundaries between work and life both spatially and temporally: spatially in the sense that labor is not confined to one’s workplace, but disperses itself in all realms of public and private activity and temporally in a sense that work time and free time become indistinguishable.

For my discussion here, what is central about Lazzarato’s definition of immaterial labor is that it offers a theoretical framework to discuss the changing nature of work that accompanied the post-industrial turn specifically from the perspective of knowledge production. Going back to Barkan’s (1966) claim about “controls operating in competent works by artists, critics and others engaged in art” (p. 244), it is notable that these controls were, for Barkan, not only a question of the relation between the artist or critic and their work (e.g. skills), but first and foremost dealing with one’s relation to *life*:

The professional scholars in art--the artists, the critics, the historians--would be the models for inquiry, because the kind of human meaning questions they ask about art and life, and their particular ways of conceiving and acting on these questions are the kinds of questions and ways of acting that art instruction would be seeking to teach students to ask and act upon. The artist and critic would serve as models for questions that could be asked about contemporary life. The historian would serve as model for questions that might be asked about art and life in other times, other societies, and other cultures in order to illuminate the meaning of the past for better understanding of current pressing problems. (Barkan, 1966, p. 246)

While similar calls for the integration of art and life can be found from the social reconstructionists of the 1930s (e.g. Edwin Ziegfeld’s Owatonna Art Education Project), what is specifically interesting about the discipline-based approach suggested by Barkan is that “questions ... about art and life” are segmented and organized in different professional “models” that constitute three cognitive configurations of art and life. Contra the “simple,” “easy,” and “fun” learning in creative self-expression that centered around the ambiguous pair *art and creativity*, these configurations provided identifiable subject positions that directed art education’s knowledge production. Learning, in other words, was to become a performance of the cognitive capacities of art professionals and the societal task of art education was to integrate this performance in students’ lives by teaching them “to ask and act upon” questions that these configurations delineated.

These linguistic and cognitive performances of asking and acting upon questions that art professionals provide are, indeed, in striking contrast with the mere “activity of the hands” that Taylor (1966) criticized. These new cognitive characteristics of art education come close

to the informational and cultural aspects of immaterial labor, namely to its function as a social relationship that engages workers by *activating* them rather than by commanding. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) argue,

When Dewey confronted the modern industrial paradigm he viewed the characteristics of factory labor as running counter to democratic exchange and tending to form a silent and passive public. Today, however, post-Fordism and the immaterial paradigm of production adopt performativity, communication, and collaboration as central characteristics. Performance has been put to work. Every form of labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a relationship or an affect, solving problems or providing information, from sales work to financial services, is fundamentally a performance: the product is the act itself. (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 200)

In the context of art education, the claim that “product is the act itself” can be understood in terms of Barkan’s initial suggestion concerning the change from “specific skills” to *ways* of working and seeing; ways that, following his advocacy for discipline-based approach, find their *form* in the *cognitive abilities* of the artist, the critic, and the art historian. This performative element is what makes the immaterial content of learning seem liberating when contrasted with material work: rather than being constrained by the form of the work (e.g. “activity of the hands”), learning is coupled with human agency as an active relation with the social world. Lazzarato writes,

workers are expected to become “active subjects” in the coordination of the various functions of production, instead of being subjected to it as simple command. We arrive at a point where a collective learning process becomes the heart of productivity, because it is no longer matter of finding different ways of composing and organizing already existing job functions, but of looking for new ones. (Lazzarato, 1996, pp. 135)

This is what we currently see in, for example, National Education Association (NEA)’s advocacy for the “Four Cs,” that of, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity, as part of the advocacy for the “21st Century Skills” (National Education Association, n.d.). The “human potential” that art educators “shape” is, then, raw material for what we have now become accustomed to call life-long learning. Akin to post-Fordist labor, the boundaries between life and learning are blurred, while simultaneously being organized in cognitive segments like the Four Cs or Barkan’s three disciplines of art.

Immaterialization of Art

What does Allan Kaprow bring in to this discussion? Here, it is worth going back to Molesworth’s (2003) argument concerning the post-WWII American avant-garde and its relation to the changing landscape of labor. She points out the “new criteria” for judging works of art emerged from a “double rejection:”

as artists stopped employing traditional artistic skills, they also stopped making works of art that imagined the museum or the collector's home as their final destination. Instead, artists attempted to make works of art that would actively resist easy assimilation into the

realm of the art market, where art was seen to be one luxury commodity among many. (Molesworth, 2003, p. 29)

Indeed, Kaprow was one of the key figures in the scene that Molesworth discusses. Heavily influenced by Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934/2005; see Kelley, 1993), Kaprow's artistic practice prioritized experiential aspects of art. After leaving painting in the late 1950s in favor of his Happenings, Kaprow's works clearly manifested the aspects of new forms of artistic labor found in Molesworth: they were not based on traditional skills and they did not produce objects that could be sold in the art market.

Kaprow offers an approach to the immaterialization of art that, unlike discipline-based knowledge production in art education, was much less structured. Here, my point is not to say that Kaprow was somehow more liberating than Barkan. After all, Kaprow's Happenings also manifest what Hardt and Negri argue on the performative nature of immaterial labor; that the "product is the act itself." Thus, both Kaprow and Barkan ought to be understood as two sides of the same coin, that is, as attempts to seek new approaches to the relation between labor and human agency during the post-industrial turn. Indeed, taking Kaprow's deep engagement with Dewey into consideration, Taylor's critique of the "bizarrely distorted" reading of Dewey's aesthetics by art educators in the past (that "art could be studied only through the act of production" [Taylor, 1966, p. 44]) finds an intriguing counterpart in Kaprow, whose experience-driven artistic work focused on the very *act of art*.

Kaprow's address at the 1965 Seminar seems, at first, to stand in striking contrast to Barkan. Contra Barkan's attempt to identify the *controls* that operate in art and criticism, Kaprow argued that "by wishing to systematically investigate creativity for the sake of establishing controls for teaching purposes, we may be unconsciously searching for another, merely updated, academic rulebook" (Kaprow, 1966, p. 74). For him, artists operate on the basis of "mystery or magic" (p. 82) that their work unfolds when in contact with the audience and it is in this *mystery* where the educational potential of art resides. Despite the danger of oversimplifying his argument, Kaprow's suggestion for the seminar can be distilled into the following statement: "Instead of extrapolating criteria from what artists seem to do in so-called professional situations, for application to school situations, it might be a good idea to see what happens when an artist interested in school children tries to convey his magic in the classroom" (p. 82).

"Might be a good idea," "see what happens," "tries to convey." The inherent unpredictability that Kaprow's words express reveals a close affinity between his approach to art and education. After all, Happenings created situations that, as Molesworth (2003) put it, "provided no discrete or permanent object, no comfortable or passive spectatorship" (p. 44) that, in the context of education, would have functioned as a basis for a clearly articulated curriculum. For Kaprow, "[t]hings, people and their needs sit still only when our mind substitutes for them a stable concept" (Kaprow, 1966, p. 81), meaning that the cognitive configurations of art and life that Barkan suggested (the artist, the critic, the art historian) were stabilizations of mind that removed the element of experience from education and replaced it with discursive control. By prioritizing the experiential and the ephemeral in art

and education, Kaprow offered new criteria for art educators to perform their labor through scenes of magic that could never form the kind of “rulebook” like Barkan’s *A Foundation for Art Education*.

How, then, to understand Kaprow’s suggestions in terms of the immaterialization of art education’s labor in the emerging, post-industrial landscape? While the shift from object-centered to experience-driven practices allowed Kaprow to resist the commodification of his own artistic work, it was also an attempt to create what he, in an essay written in 1958, had called “total art” (Kaprow, 1993, pp. 10-13). The totality of art emerged from its blurring with non-art and, eventually, with everyday life. As he wrote about Happenings in 1966, “Unlike the ‘cooler’ styles of Pop, Op, and Kinetics, in which imagination is filtered through a specialized medium and a privileged showplace, the Happenings do not merely allude to what is going on in our bedrooms, in the drugstores, and at the airports; they are right there” (p. 65). When read vis-à-vis the educational program Kaprow suggested in the Seminar, his take on the relationship between art, life, and education went beyond practical applications (as in the aforementioned Owatonna Art Education Project in the 1930s) and the kind of questions about life that Barkan was after. Instead, the immaterial labor of art educators and the student agency it ought to bring about were to stem from the very lack of rules in artistic production, leading to a kind of “collective learning process” that Lazzarato would later position at the heart of productivity in post-Fordism. From this perspective, Kaprow’s ideal students are not the ones who simply do what the teacher tells them to do, but the ones who are open to the unpredictability of art and ready to immerse themselves completely in the educational event set up by the art(ist) teacher. At the end, imagination – one of the central components of experience-driven art for Kaprow – becomes, “a way to be alive” (Kaprow, 1966, p. 84), thus turning the external control embedded in objects, rules, and passive spectatorship into internal adaptability to the events of education. In Lazzarato’s terms, Kaprow’s art education prioritized the cultural content of immaterial labor over the informational, allowing a kind of art-based knowledge production without clearly delineated limits. Art was, in other words, what turned life into education and education into life, further consolidating Hardt and Negri’s claim that *performance has been put to work*.

Conclusions

Needless to say, there are some limitations and possible shortcomings in my argument. Since Lazzarato does not specifically address the work of artists or educators and locates the beginning of the transformation from Fordism to post-Fordism to the early 1970s, it would be problematic to draw direct, causal relations between his conceptualization of immaterial labor and the 1965 Seminar. It is also important to emphasize that *post-industrial turn* and *immaterial labor* are not to be understood as totalizing, epochal concepts that signify all work in the 1960s or today. After all, both art education as well as industrial production continue to be embedded in very material practices whose materiality is always connected to the global distribution of people, labor, and materials. In addition, my aim is not to suggest that the emerging immaterialization of art education’s labor (i.e. the shifting emphasis from “activity of the hands” to “ways of working and seeing”) in the 1960s led art teachers into a totalizing trap of managerialism that embeds their work together with all social life in capital

accumulation. I do believe that there is always *work* (both material and immaterial; artistic and educational) that remains under the radar of institutions as well as institutional discourses that try to represent it.

Despite these limitations, I see that such comparative reading between these two histories – labor and art education – may help art educators to better contextualize the new criteria for their work that emerged around the time of the Seminar and its relation to the broader social and economic changes that have taken place in the past decades. Today, when art educators are expected to “shape human potential” so that it fits with the needs and interests of the so-called creative industries (immaterial labor par excellence), the political task of art education research is, I believe, to approach the relation between art, education, and the potentials of human life aside from clearly constructed or seemingly boundless models for flexible labor. This requires critical re-examination and historicization of our current “ways of working,” just like what the 1965 Seminar attempted to do.

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