

Learning to Breathe Protest



The beginning of the protests, the University of Vienna (Universität Wien).



An introduction and personal account of the protests at the art academies in Vienna and Munich, in the context of the wave of struggles and occupations that occurred across the educational sector in Europe, USA, South East Asia and South America in late 2009, written by people involved with *salong* (Munich), *interflugs* (Berlin), *academy of refusal* (Vienna), *10th floor* (London), March 2010.

Some Background

The processes that characterise what many now refer to as the neoliberalisation of education have various starting points and significant dates but GATS (General Agreement on Trades and Services) is worth citing. The global drive towards the privatisation of public goods and services (including the education system) can be understood as an ongoing process, certainly since GATS was first laid out during the constitution of the WTO in 1994. Along with other public services, the educational sector becomes subject to this agreement the moment an individual member state expands the 'liberalising' function of GATS into its university system. The agreement serves to monitor and restrict government measures that might have a negative effect on the trade in services – GATS grant commercial and foreign competitors equal rights to state financed institutions. In theory, the WTO member states are free to maintain individual control over their educational systems. In practice, this nominal control is virtually impossible to maintain.

The Bologna Process

The official starting point of the European Bologna Process is the Bologna declaration of 1999, signed by representatives from 29 countries. With the stated aim of creating a European Higher Education Area it sets out to "make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and for students and scholars from other continents".² The use of the term "competitive" and emphasis on international overseas students is markedly different from an earlier agreement drawn up in Bologna in 1988 (signed by 660 universities from 78 countries), the *Magna Charta Universitatum*.³ In this document it's made clear that the university as such, be regarded as an 'autonomous' institution and that furthermore "...to meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power."

Within a decade, the humanist model of the 'autonomous institution' as laid out in 1988 had been degraded substantially and the recomposition of education in line with the broader global economy was well underway. But how did this shift occur, what were the operative terms? For this we might turn to an intermediate preparatory paper, the Sorbonne declaration, signed by the four Ministers in charge for France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, at the University Paris-Sorbonne, May 25 1998. Here we find reference to the knowledge economy and the claim that Europe should not be solely regarded in terms of "the Euro, of the banks and the economy: it must be a Europe of knowledge as well".⁴ A "Europe of knowledge" requires an educational system acting as a bridge between the production and maintenance of knowledge and the interests of capital. It also requires a university-educated European citizen.

In tandem with this process, by 1997 the Schengen Agreement had been incorporated into mainstream European Union law as the Amsterdam Treaty. The European stronghold had been enhanced by aggressively enforcing external frontiers, whilst within the European Union border-controls were being loosened. The ensuing strict immigration-regulations for non-EU students in European countries as well as extortionate tuition fees (UK: three times the amount of

EU-students' fees) show the economic selection process at play⁵ (e.g. the growing importance of education as a tradable export factor). While the inner-European education systems are being restructured to fulfil the needs for measurable and exchangeable knowledge transfer, the legal standards for free and unrestricted trade with this newly standardised commodity are regulated through the GATS.

To date, 46 states have signed up to the Bologna process (28 to the Schengen Agreement) and what has been presented as inevitable across European member states has the legal status of a recommendation only. Simply put, it's far less clear, less inevitable, less legally binding than government ministers would have us believe. The introduction of the BA/MA system for example, which in mainstream media (as well as current student protests) has been the most discussed symptom of the educational reforms, refers only to a 'recommendation' to introduce a two-step-system. Neither BA/MA nor restrictions on international overseas student applications are mentioned, nor any recommendations on the actual structure of the studies made.⁶ Those who promote the reforms have claimed that students' mobility and exchange would be made possible through modularisation and the common European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). In fact, student mobility, as such, has in most cases been made more difficult due to restrictions in what are now firmly structured undergraduate programmes and universities' predictably rigid administrative bureaucracy. Geographical and social 'mobility' only occur between BA and MA studies and only for those who can afford another higher degree.

In Germany the implications of the two-step system and modularisation led to the refusal of German Art Academies to participate in the Bologna process (2004). By 2010, most German fine art departments had maintained this refusal against pressure from local ministerial departments, holding on to the 'classic' German masterclass-system. In the case of the Berlin University of Art (Universität der Künste Berlin – UdK) for example, this has led to a marked difference in degree structure between fine art students ('free, genius artists') and fellow students ('technocrat, cultural labourers') in the design, architecture, music and theatre faculties (now studying under the restructured system). The effects of this split within the UdK are only now becoming visible, and might serve as an explanation for the general lack of student networking (between the faculties), solidarity, criticality and visibility in the recent wave of student protest. Activities and discussions were sporadic and mainly focussed on the individual problems within tightened study programmes, etc. The students of the UdK did not participate in the protests centred around the two main universities of Berlin, and the few attempts to formulate criticism towards educational and institutional politics remained with some individuals.

Almost a decade after the first Bologna meeting in 1999, Europe has just witnessed the first phase of widespread protests against various attempts by the state to implement the 'Process' and the commodification and enclosure of education. It's perhaps unsurprising then that the initial explosion of this recent wave of student dissent and protest occurred in the "best practice" centre of the Bologna Process, Austria in late 2009.

As an 'exemplary' model of educational neoliberalisation Austria moved to introduce the BA/MA and re-introduce tuition fees (there hadn't been any since 1972) with the 2002 university law which came to effect under a coalition of the conservatives and the far right. The Austrian state has continued to break down democratic university structures by weakening the voice of students and mid-level faculty within the various committees while strengthening and expanding the decision-making powers of the rectorate (The Head of School). It also introduced a business-like structure for handling budgets and the 'aims' of

the university: an advisory university board was deployed consisting 50% of members elected by the government (mostly ex-politicians and/or businessmen) and 50% elected by the university. The board has the final say on possible motions of no-confidence towards the Rector, and most importantly the final say on the Service Level Agreement (SLA) that was also introduced in 2002 and is negotiated between the government and the rectorate. In line with this, the budget from the ministry for the higher education sector is no longer based on fixed amounts divided between institutions but on a 'performance' related system. The accepted parameters of which are based on statistics covering so called 'study-activity', the amount of exams students take and the speed at which students complete studies, etc. The SLA also includes the number of women employed by respective educational institutions but due to the manner of calculation, institutions that have significantly increased representation can still receive less than those where the situation remains unchanged.

Vienna 2009

In summer 2009 a new amendment to the university law was put forward. Many regarded this as a further assault on the democratic process that underpins the educational system and in particular the 'legitimacy' of university structures. A number of mainstream political parties and institutional representatives had made their objections known at the time but were totally ignored by the National government. In June 2009, shortly before the summer break, a meeting was called to organise protest against the amendment and to connect the various struggles against the 'de-democratisation' and neoliberalisation of education – the Network for Emancipatory Education was founded. This proved to be an important turning point as most groups had up until this point, been working independently, dealing with issues and concerns specifically linked to the institutions and social contexts in which they studied, lived and worked. These included a number of self-organised reading groups and workshops from students at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna dealing with emancipatory pedagogy, the history of neoliberalisation of education, critique of the study plans, critical discourse about the interconnections of economy and art, creative industries, the cognitariat, etc. At the main university there had been protests at the Departments for International Development and



Political Science. Also, students from different departments had been setting up a social space, called Widerstandscafé (Resistance café), and protest forms like 'action-days' on campus. In addition, there had also been a major protest and demonstration led by school-kids and teachers and a group called Kindergarten Insurrection was formed by people working in childcare; developments that fuelled the situation in autumn.

In its relatively short existence the Network for Emancipatory Education set out to highlight the links between the university and the rest of society. This was achieved (at least initially), e.g. by showing the student as worker both in precarious job situations in and outside the university and directly linked to the broader economy.⁷ That said, the uptake in the mainstream press and the manner in which the media factored in the broader critique of neoliberalisation took everyone by surprise. But since the core of the protest was relatively small there was uncertainty as to whether resistance could be continued into the autumn term – as the protest to avoid the passing of the initial law proved to be unsuccessful and was passed in summer. In October 2009, a new SLA was due to be signed between the ministry and the rectorate at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. A major point of dispute was the possible extension of the BA/MA system across all parts of the curriculum. Against this backdrop a group of

students and teachers started working together to distribute information on the Bologna Process and the implications of the introduction of BA/MA. Further meetings with every class of the Academy were scheduled: a glossary on the Bologna Process, a short history of BA/MA at the institution, were handed out and the hierarchical structures of the institution and their connection to the university law were comprehensively discussed.

There was a general concern that the Rector would (again) act against the will of those working and studying at the Academy it was decided to apply public pressure before his meeting with the ministry. With support of the senate, students and teaching staff held a press conference two days before the scheduled meeting and a press release was issued. This made clear that the majority of students/workers at the institution were not only against the extension of the BA/MA system but opposed the broader process of neoliberalisation ushered in by the university law and Bologna Process, a point not fully covered in the mainstream media.

From the mainstream media news, vienna.at October 21st 2009:

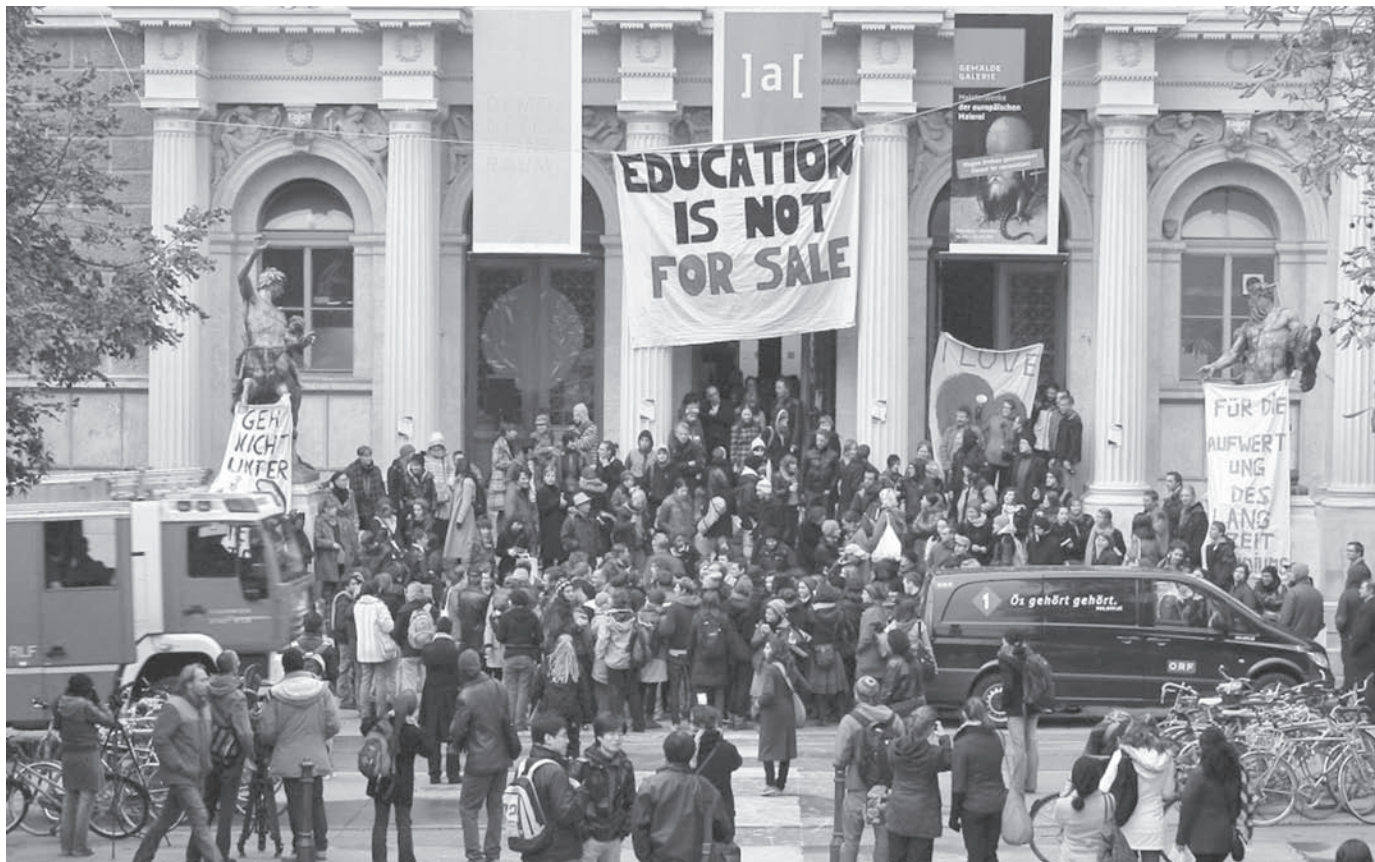
"Concrete demands from students and teaching staff directed towards the vice principal, Schmidt-Wulffen, are to represent 'the position of the academy instead of his private agenda', during the upcoming negotiations with the ministry for science and education. Another demand is to maintain the current diploma degree. A petition calls for the full abolition of tuition fees, knowledge-asset-systems and output-agreements and against the 'degradation of universities and schools towards jobmarket-oriented training posts'."⁸

Two days after the press release was issued and the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna was occupied, another demonstration was called. This time the main lecture hall of the Vienna University was also occupied. The following weekend occupations occurred in Graz, the Technical University of Vienna – with further occupations then taking place in Munich, Berlin – initiating a wave of university protests and occupations throughout Europe.⁹

Writing this, we are aware, that none of these processes seemed and were as linear as they might look like in this account. Looking back, we would like to present a few threads and identify what for us were important first steps. All in all, the university occupations of autumn 2009 would not have been possible without the input of many people in, around and also from outside the affected institutions. Certainly not without those who've worked tirelessly on pinpointing not only the grievances in the educational system but across the social field in general – organising protests, articulating and living alternatives.

Left: The occupied Academy of Fine Arts Vienna (Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien).





Accounts of Occupation¹⁰

Occupation¹¹

This performative act does not create something new out of an ominous nothingness. Instead, the space itself becomes visible and utilizable in a different dimension. In contrast to taking possession of it, occupying a space means to liberate it from its ostensible possessors. Occupation means a maximal densification of energy, work and discussion with a simultaneous deceleration and disruption of social speed.

THE TIME IS NEVER RIPE AND HAS THEREFORE ALWAYS ALREADY COME.¹²

"We have to go in now", declares an uncertain voice over the megaphone – suddenly a space opens up.

V: There had been many attempts to organise protests, but the moment the first occupation was proclaimed, everything changed. Students, non-students, teaching staff all came together in the warmth of the occupied space, appropriating the previously stiff, cold, neo-classical assembly hall and turning it into a site of negotiation. Here, sharing knowledge and experience, working and functioning collectively cut through established power-structures.

Solidarity and collective euphoria created enough energy for unforeseen workloads of organising, discussing, writing, preparing demonstrations, giving interviews, daily plenary meetings. Collectively, the head of the institution was challenged, the hierarchical structures put to disposition.

A position of power was taken – without being able to actually grasp what this meant, in a tempo that was breath-taking, with the attention of mainstream-media and international observers that could not be overseen, making it necessary, making it unavoidable to just go from moment to moment, situation to situation, being fully within it.

Improvisation: Elusive and Unstable

"In speaking of improvisation we not only discuss the production of particular sounds or events but the production of social spaces as well. ... Where applied, improvisation brings about glimpses of instability. If it is working, its elusive qualities evades solidification and commodification – at least in the moment."¹³

M: In Munich someone placed a banner, a simple gesture of solidarity with the occupations in Vienna. Parallel to this, someone had printed a flyer announcing the academy was "to be occupied". The rumour quickly made the rounds. People met the next day, speeches were held, a few flags waved, then the assembly hall of the academy was effectively occupied. A week later the occupation moved into the main lecture hall of the main university. From the idea to its implementation, it was a way of surprising ease.

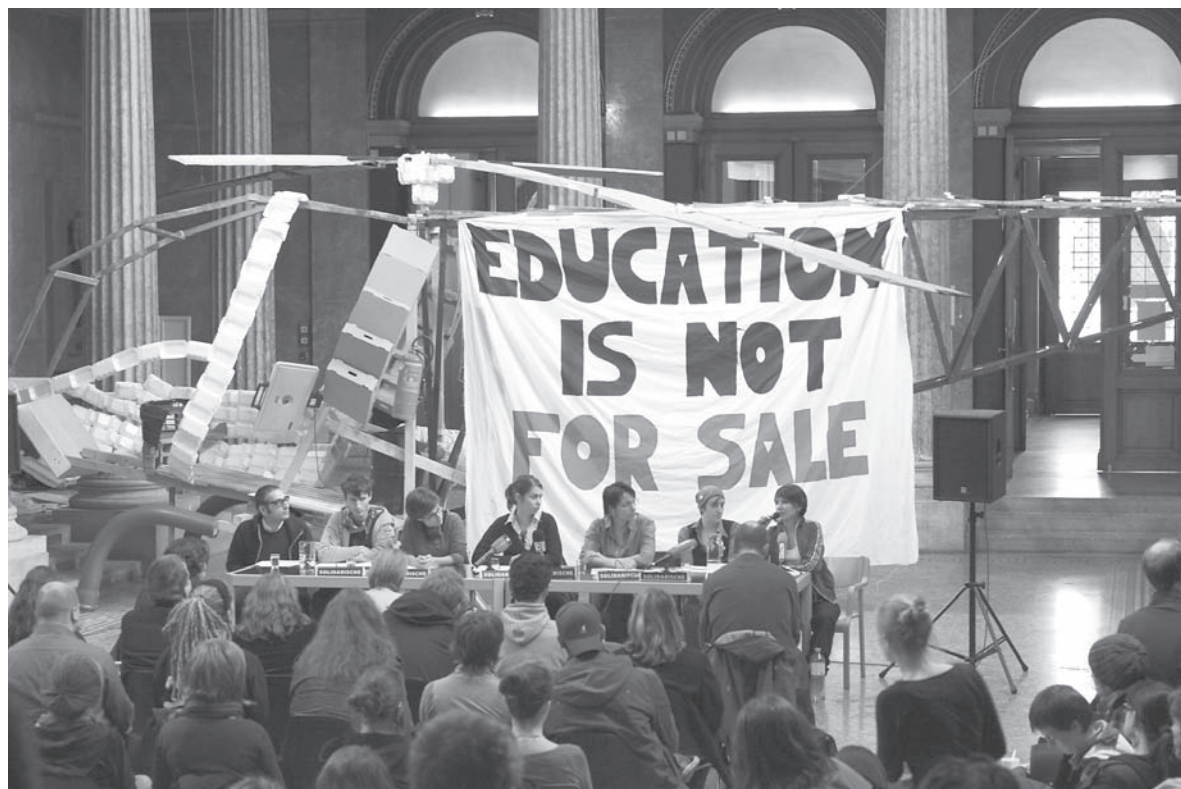
V: Working groups were set up to give inputs to the daily plenary. The plenary itself had to be

prepared every day, people bringing in the news, setting up the situation (chairs, microphone), writing protocols. Signs were used for improving communication, methods had to be developed for how to make proposals for decisions. Aim of it all was to create a situation with no leaders, where everyone had a say, without "majority-votes" where everything would be discussed until a consensus was worked out, where everyone was given an equal opportunity to speak, and women being favoured in this respect. It was claimed to be a grassroots democracy, an anti-sexist, feminist space.

The meetings took hours. But they were supposed to take hours. They were supposed to go on forever. They created a different structure of relevance, a different universe, one in which time was set out of order.

X: It seemed as if different circles of speed and information were forming. The ones spending almost all of their time with protest-organising, working group co-ordination, reading, communicating, were diving into a nucleus, dissolving into a different rhythm, time, structure. Others had to go to work, had other responsibilities they could not or did not want to give up, became ill, needed more regular working times, were torn between the different structures, trying to find compromises, ways of maintaining the life that was expected from them in the established order and engage in the protest, others had never given up their structures, were giving inputs and/or demanding digestible outputs from the ones more involved.

The question of legitimation arose. Signatures



First press conference at the then-occupied Academy of Fine Arts Vienna (Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien).

like "the occupiers", "the protesters" were used while the plenary was made up of an ever-changing group of people. It became clear that "grassroots-democracy" actually meant "democracy of those who are present".

It had been agreed, that there should never be anything like "the" movement. There should not be a committee of leaders deciding where to go. No dogmatic political direction should be imposed on everyone, it should be a space where people of different political and social background would have the freedom to cooperate.

Y: The non-representational form, the attempt to simply DO what was demanded is a central characteristic of the protest. Nevertheless, we felt and feel the need to explain and communicate what happened, making these processes transparent to others in order to participate and rethink. What we experienced was a breakout of the various dissatisfactions with the political as well as economic situation (not only) in the academic institution. It brought to light the size of the network of critically thinking people: politically or socially engaged working groups, collectives, institutionalised spaces which normally didn't get as much attention and other non-organised individuals in different occupations, before invisible as potential supporters, who have now raised their voices in more or less open support.

D: The occupations were once called "university in the best sense". I totally agree! However, one must distinguish between self-organisation and self-help. It would be self-help to mend the holes in the Bologna process with one's own initiative. Self-organisation wants more, namely a change of society against the spirit that stands behind Bologna, which hovers over everything anyway. Specifically, it could seem as if self-initiated student projects are very welcome to those failed institutions due to the Bologna Process.

M: Of course, there is always the danger of mending holes, but there is a way to avoid this. As there was nothing we really AIMED for. It was demonstrated that this unrest would not possibly be stopped by fulfilling reformist demands but that instead what was done and lived was the demand, that it was rejected to acknowledge any other authority than the one of the people being in the protests themselves to have the power to fulfil any demands – whereas then they were not called "demands" any more, then they were "practice".

From mainstream media news, standard.at November 3rd 2009:

'Network-protest leaves politicians helpless The University protests don't have leaders, that makes them

Right: The second press-conference in the occupied hall of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna (Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien).

strong – Austria’s political parties haven’t learned to organise themselves in the net yet. “The politicians are therefore confronted with a heterogeneous mass of students that cannot easily be put into an ideological box. ... The mediation of the protests [e.g. a livestream was installed in the main occupied lecture hall] has various advantages: “Most important is the transparency. Especially after the parties and the alleged damages of the first days, people could see for themselves that there was also constructive work done. That way we were not dependent on traditional media any more.” ... Politics are clueless, such a form of protest is unknown to political parties ... and politicians wanting a controllable communication process. ... The occupants refused to nominate a representative as was requested by Hahn [minister for science and research].”¹⁴

R: A key task has to be to introduce the market ‘failure’ of a capitalist economy into the comfortable discussions on how universities might best suit the interests of the labour market; or how everyone might best become a member of the creative middle class. The aim cannot simply be the defence of a supposedly innocent humanist model of the university – what needs to be challenged is the university’s role in reproducing capitalism, not only ideologically, but also as a site of direct accumulation and exploitation

Postscript

B: An immense interest from (leftist) academics in these protests made me think about the hopes and of the social potential of this lived “counter-reality”. And of the status that a visible student protest like this still holds for many. The projections and encouragement from certain parts of academia might seem overwhelming, contrasting with the lack of consequences on the political surface level. The rejection of pragmatism and effectiveness amongst some protesting groups are for sure in themselves legitimate. But can this resistance be reapplied in a way that even those outside of the occupations can gain from their experiences?

V: As was shown in the organisation of the protests against the 10-Year-Anniversary of the Bologna Process, a network has been built up during the protests, that – although it might be a very small percentage of the people temporarily engaged in the occupations – has been broadened and made more effective. This does not only affect people at the different institutions, or at least is further interwoven with other structures – be it because of work and/or politically working contexts. But the lack of an occupied space, together with the necessary state of exception for the participants, is clearly noticeable as lack of collectivity. An important question is how to maintain a level of collectivity once it’s reached and how to work with the creation and dissolution of disruptive energies – where to withdraw to? How to withdraw and restart together? How to build a support context for everyone who suddenly has to stand alone again?

B: I find important for example, how we are working together on this text, bringing in different viewpoints from art academies in Germany and Austria – generally the communication between active groups seems to take on a different quality.

Maybe the collective memory of a protest can initiate a state of collectivity, a certain activist knowledge on how to better exist and work together, that can be carried further, towards other locations of struggle and movement? How can we effectively organise to infiltrate the educational institutions and initiate the production of independent and emancipatory structures?

I understand that you have been struggling inside the occupied spaces to come close to self-defined models of communication, of social interaction, of communisation, that correlate with your demands towards the educational system. That you have tried to enact criticism by turning the occupation into a kind of lived social utopia. One where academicised feminist studies would



Demonstration on March 12th 2010 at the Parliament Building, Vienna.

This is in such huge contrast to the urge for linear development and progress, the need for predictable, monogamous security. The disillusion from something that for the glimpse of a second seemed to be the glorified solution to everything is necessary.

Some links

unsereuni.at
bolognaburns.org
uniriot.org
edu-factory.org
edumeltdown.blogspot.de
wirbelwind.noblogs.org
theimaginarycommittee.wordpress.com
occupyca.wordpress.com
emancipating-education-for-all.org
emanzipatorischebildung.blogspot.at

Some further reading

The Economy Has Left The Building, ed. Rosa Kerosene, 2008
Toward A Global Autonomous University, the edu-factory collective, 2009

Notes

1. For further contextualisation of the neoliberalisation of education see for example Silvia Federici’s *Education and the Enclosure of Knowledge in the Global University* (2008), on the commercialisation and corporatisation of academic life, George Caffentzis’ *Throwing Away The Ladder: The Universities In The Crisis* (1975), on the turn in educational politics in the USA in the mid ’70s – a turn that might be read as exemplary for further developments in other parts of the world – and *CAFA and the Struggle Against Structurally Adjusted Education in Africa* by Ousseina Alidou, Caffentzis and Federici for an analysis of the World Bank’s role in educational politics in Africa.
2. http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc1290_en.htm
3. www.magna-charta.org/pdf/mc_pdf/mc_english.pdf
4. http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Sorbonne_declaration.pdf
5. In Austria, for example, students from outside the EU are not allowed to earn more than 340 Euros a month (in case they achieve to get permission to work) but have to have proof of 7,000 Euros (increasing yearly) in their account once a year, and have to pay tuition fees.
6. <http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf>
7. For a discussion of the challenges and potential of the ‘edu-supermarket’ see for example Marc Bousquet and Tiziana Terranova ‘Recomposing The University’ (2004) <http://www.metamute.org/en/Recomposing-the-University>
8. Translated from: <http://www.vienna.at/news/wien/artikel/generalstreik--akademie-der-bildenden-kuenste-besetzt/cn/news-20091021-05051855>
9. See a map of the occupied spaces at: <http://tinyurl.com/yacpkb>
10. The following statements are personal accounts from the inside of the occupied art academies in Vienna and Munich as well as comments from outside, compiled in order to give a picture of the personal, the group-psychological, and micro-political structures that evolved during the protests.
11. For the discussion of the implications an occupation of a university can have, the New School occupation and the pamphlet *Perspectives on the takeover of a building* was very important and inspiring <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/11562065/The-New-School-Occupation-Perspectives-on-the-Takeover-of-a-Building>> As well as the later *Pre-occupied, The Logic of Occupation* <<http://jdeanicite.typepad.com/files/preoccupied-reading.pdf>>
12. From a flyer made during the occupations in Vienna.
13. Mattin, ‘Against Representation’: http://www.mattin.org/essays/Against_Representation.html
14. Translated from: <http://derstandard.at/1256743667434/Netzwerk-Protest-macht-Politiker-ratlos>

be re-applied and utilised in a radical disclosure of still dominating sexist behaviour, for example. Or by allowing the occupied spaces to be open for homeless people, while being aware of the public controversy this might entail.

V: Actually, the structures and problems varied very much in the different occupied spaces and the question of social utopia needs to be handled with care ... the “heart” of what was called “a movement” was the Audimax, the biggest lecture room of the main university. Here, a laboratory of a social movement seemed to be condensed, since (in contrast to the art academy for example) people from a broad spectrum of social backgrounds came together.

The space itself (its interior being built in a typical lecture-room structure) made it difficult to set up anti-hierarchical meetings. Sitting in rows directed towards where the front-lecture would usually take place, the setting was easy to use as a (male) profiling platform.

Although the politics of representation were decentralised, meaning that the typical narrowing to only a few leading figures was avoided and the people speaking to the public were mainly female, the Audimax occupation as the centre of the protests faced heavy problems with achieving the grassroots feminist claims in practice.

It was shocking too see how deeply an anti-feminist attitude was and is embedded within large parts of society, manifesting in discriminating reactions towards the feminist demands of the protesters and developments like the F.L.I.T. space (WomenLesbianIntersexTrans-space) at the occupied university.

Still, the very fact that problems like these occurred proves that with all the difficulties, the standard conditions of society were made visible, were challenged and disposed for deconstruction.

B: The described difficulty in communicating practical demands out of this “deconstructed” situation, might have to do with the potentially radical quality of this chosen form of resistance. If education was to take on forms as those claimed by the protesters, if it was to be a real-democratic, emancipating power, it would mean to exclude its reproductive functions as producer of human capital.

Anyway, maybe we have to stop looking for answers in all these accounts, accepting the occurrence of ever more questions once you start to produce “answers”. To keep digging and to never stop questioning ... maybe we will get closer to the core of what is called education, or knowledge.

PPS

What is needed is a permanent improvisation, a permanent self-criticism, the possibility to take and give up responsibilities, the forming and dissolving of practices, theories, lives.