

The Academy and the Corporate Public

Stephan Dillemath



Introduction

As part of his ongoing research project *The Academy and the Corporate Public* that started in 1999 at the Kunsthøgskolen in Bergen, Stephan Dilemuth looks at institutional research and how it relates to self-organization and bohemia. His research project examines the relationship between the academy (as a discursive field in the fine arts) and the public sphere in the midst of a seismic shift induced by the corporate world economy. Dilemuth claims that this shift ought to go hand-in-hand with a different function for the arts, a different conception of the role of the artist and — this is the big one — a higher quality of education and research.

He asks: What part do students, teachers and researchers play in these developments? Should we try to adapt to this scenario as we see it being rolled out before our eyes, or should we try to resist and change it to meet our needs?

What is Happening Right Now?

The fall of 2009 brought widespread protests and squatting of universities by students, starting at the Art Academy in Vienna and moving on to other countries in Europe and even the US. The occupations were triggered by the failure of the Bologna Process, a failure on all possible levels.

Dilemuth points to the situation in Germany:

— The implementation of BA/MA modules and

credit points marks a break with the Humboldt tradition of which Germany has always been so proud. German higher education was always intended to enable students to engage in a process of self-formation. But now students realize that commercial and technological factors are solely responsible for the form their education takes. This comes as no surprise as Bertelsmann, one of the most powerful media corporations, was the instigator of the Bologna Process.

— Student fees have been introduced. Stephan Dilemuth sees this as a first step towards the privatization of education. Whereas previously students were able to study for free, they are now charged about 450 Euros per semester, which may well herald the conversion of universities into profit-making organizations.

— Democratic forms of decision-making within the institutions, referred to in Germany as the Autonomy of Higher Education, have been replaced by corporate business structures that give external members of the freshly installed supervisory boards undue influence over the universities. Managers from such large corporations as Siemens and BMW have been appointed as board members at the university in Munich.

Dillemuth claims that the devastating effects of neo-liberal politics on the arts, the educational institutions and society as a whole have become more and more visible over the years. In light of the global financial crash, people seem to feel that the corporate infiltration into all public sectors, e.g. universities, has gone too far.

SD points to an interesting example of the attitude towards the squatting students displayed by the director of the university in Innsbruck, who called the squatting and what happened around it 'universality in the best sense'. SD claims that our educational institutions are in ruins. In the rubble we would find a mix of failed hegemonic projects: patriarchy, neo-liberalism and civic society.

In the mess created by the Bologna Process we would find caves and caverns, dark matter and blind spots. Research, as Dillemuth explains, could be seen as a tool for exploring the possibilities and uncertainties of the situation.

Problems and Advantages of Research

Where and how to talk about research? Stephan Dillemuth advocates extreme caution in our approach, to avoid promoting and perpetuating the contemporary hype of research, risking its inflation or even extinction. Certain problems, he claims, assail the position of research in today's higher education:

- Research has become a justification, especially when it comes to financial problems.

Whenever the word research is thrown in, the money starts to flow.

- A specific jargon is created, a research-funding-legitimation lingo that has polluted all research projects right from the beginning.
- Research has become an obligation in a curricular master plan. Students and teachers are forced into research, thus it has ceased to be any fun anymore.
- Evaluation is problematic; forced research has to be reviewed, and thus evaluation criteria for students and institutions have to be developed. How can we measure the success of research? Through a point system (ECTS and grading), exams, external evaluation?
- Control mechanisms follow the flow of research projects and their entry and exit points. The performance of students is assessed and rated, the institution is assessed and ranked by external companies. Excellence results from streamlining.
- The exertion of control starts from the moment of the decision as to which research projects will be funded and which not, meaning that specific projects may have no chance because they could be seen as too critical or otherwise unwanted by the ruling ideology, which might be deemed preemptive censorship.
- Often only projects that can promise a profit get funding.

According to Stephan Dilemuth the predictability of outcome and a forecast yield of the findings seems to run entirely counter to an open-ended process of research.

And finally, Dilemuth emphasizes, none of these consequences are much fun for the researchers involved. They run counter to the process of teaching and learning and to enthusiastic experimentation. Research in such an environment can only be depressing — gone is 'la gaya scienza'.

According to SD, when institutional research is seen as a tool for streamlining and controlling students and staff alike, the outcome will be a predictable affirmation of the ruling ideology, the market economy.

On the other hand, Dilemuth suggests, that research could have many advantages to offer. Research is opaque; it is a journey into unknown territory; it is open-ended and the result is uncontrollable because strategy and methods of research are often determined from moment to moment, or by previous experiments, or frequently improvised, meaning they are unpredictable, despite the wishes of some of those involved. As an example SD mentions Heinz von Foerster, the cybernetics guy, who applied for funding for research projects that he had already undertaken and for which he already had a result. Foerster used the funding to finance another project instead, a brave step into the unknown.

Dilemuth believes that research has to work against its own limitations. Research into the mechan-

isms of control has to be part of research itself. This means that it is necessary for research to control its controller; research can work, *has* to work against its strictures. Research can therefore use unusual methods of resistance: strike, obstruction and protest may be some of them, open-ended experiments that can lead to new and necessary findings.

Entering the field of fine arts, Dilemuth finds an anything-goes attitude in art — an arbitrariness that renders everything equally valid and, consequently, equally boring. In his eyes, the 20th century has done a good job of breaking all the rules and proclaiming the death of art many times over.

As a result anything and everything is allowed as long as it generates desirable new commodities. The array of apparently unlimited differences seems to be wonderful only for the market. In such a situation the art world, like the fashion industry, needs seasonal hypes to make one thing more desirable than the other. The more expensive art it is, the more desired it becomes. The freedom of the market coincides with the freedom of art, and what we get in the end is an endless variety of products with a relatively affirmative entertainment value.

Dilemuth claims that knowledge gained from such proceedings can only be seen as highly questionable. Against art in its function as a mere outfitter for market ideology he proposes artistic research as an epistemological tool, a tool for insight, knowledge and cognition. A tool of reflection

about its very own function, a tool against its framing conditions, a tool that might even entertain.

Types of Research

In the following Stephan Dillemath wants to make himself the object of study in the examination of three processes: self-empowerment, self-organization and research. He suggests three categories of research that are not mandatory concepts, but rather an interpretation of his own development as an artist and researcher: pubescent, bohemian and institutional research.

Pubescent Research

Starting from his student days in the late 1970s SD notes research phenomena or methods that could be called pubescent. Such strategies were used by the punk movement, or more generally, anytime the world seemed pre-defined, pre-determined or inaccessible. From the earliest days, parents, school and the media have been telling us how to see the world, meaning there are hardly any possibilities of taking possession of it; there are no free spaces that can be occupied.

Even in art school despite great promise of self-realization and individual freedom, one will be confronted with the undeniable fact that everything has been done already and all images and strategies already exist. Thus Dillemath stresses that each young generation may well arrive at the insight that it doesn't have a chance of self-definition! Confronting this

dead-end would be exactly the moment to realize that one's own powerlessness is a chance to act: You don't have a chance but use it!

SD has compiled a list of pubescent strategies:

- It is not necessary to know what you want — it is necessary to know what you do *not* want.
- Test the limits. Where are they, how can they be made visible (provoked), how can they be crossed (transgressed)?
- Position yourself against those who are in power, those who make the rules.
- Ignorance can be useful — Repeat: I know I know nothing!
- Appropriate the means of production! A common demand of the workers' struggle. In the late 1970s, in the arts, painting was the most prominent and culturally charged discipline and could readily be hijacked. Paint was dirt-cheap, and blood-simple to appropriate if done with the right amount of stupidity. Painting could be used against painting.
- A détournement of the code, to use the code against the code: the ugly is beautiful and the beautiful is ugly.

All these strategies were processes of self-formation, self-education and identity-formation. They can be seen as experimental research. The refusal to merely reproduce the old order brought changes in the status of the powerless. Dillemath calls this pubescent

research and sees specific elements of it already present in childhood, e.g. when a toddler crawls on the kitchen floor and drags pots and pans from the shelf to bang them around. The child's mother might take the pots back into place, but five minutes later the scene repeats, an early phase of experimental research that probes the limits of power systems, against all regulations. To try the world against all odds.

Stephan Dilleymuth tells us that this is the research model already present in German art academies, and most artists follow it their whole lives; it gives us the image of the artist as the genius dilettante, anti-authoritarian, subjective, singular, individualistic and in some ways naïve. For that reason pubescent research cannot really be called research in the strict sense, for there is no reflection, hardly any evaluation and no consciousness on the part of the researcher.

Bohemian Research

Dilleymuth goes back to his vita and gives us an account of a project space that he, SD, together with Josef Strau, Nils Norman, Kiron Khosla and Merlin Carpenter were running in Cologne in the early 1990s. Right from the beginning they found two options to be particularly unattractive: to become a gallerist or to become a producers' gallery. The latter is a gallery run and financed by artists who want to show their own work and that of some friends. In Dilleymuth's eyes, this attitude is less self-organization but it is, in its desire to participate in the commodified art circuit,

self-help. He claims that he was interested in a more collective and critical practice where the art-object was to be questioned in its function. Being located in a semi-public situation, the project set out to experiment with the possibilities of the space itself, and the chance to create and encourage a situation of exchange and participation. The space became a meeting point or hangout, which means that there was a community growing around the space and its activities as long as the community determined and sustained it. The space also functioned as an archive that documented and triggered some of its activities.

Back then Dilleymuth and his friends saw the space and the activities around it as a kind of model or multiple that could be tried elsewhere. They were finding other people and initiatives that were working in a similar, self-organized way, including fanzines, electronic communication and spaces in Vienna, Hamburg and Berlin.

Dilleymuth sees those activities in the light of self-organization and self-empowerment and calls them bohemian research. He provides a list of some of its qualities:

- located in a bohemian context. The people involved find each other by mutual attraction, by elective affinities; they share the same the problem, but bring varieties kinds of knowledge and cultural background, which might develop into
- collective work, where the group constitutes more than just the sum of its members, who

need to be sufficiently different yet similar enough for the mutual attraction to turn into an increasingly differentiated discourse, which is

- based on the inquiry into the everyday problems at hand
- self-determined and self-commissioned,
- researching life by living it
- as practiced by every 20th-century avant-garde group: the Surrealists, Situationists, Kommune 1, and many more.

Unlike pubescent research Stephan sees collective methods of self-reflection at work in bohemian research, as tools for self-assurance and analysis (keeping archives, logs and diaries). Here we find the awareness necessary for a researcher's self-perception. Methods for staging experiments, planning strategies and evaluating results may well lead to more experiments.

Dillemuth adds that this period of bohemian research was the experience from which he learned the most. It became his academy, his art education. He considers self-organization to be generally an activity of self-formation and education, of making academy, which leads him to enquire further about the academy and its history; self-organization vs. institution; bohemian research vs. institutional research.

Institutional Research

In the following Herr Dillemuth lectures about the

Academy and the University being historically two separate means of knowledge production and dissemination. The development of the University can be seen as three phases:

- The scholastic phase, reasoning for the legitimization and interpretation of Christian dogma.
- The Humboldt University method — knowledge production through research; research and learning go hand in hand; the seminar is a new device for learning in groups.
- The phase we find ourselves in today, of which the description is still being formed. Can we say that today the university is inviting for creating communities around knowledge, or is it delimiting access to knowledge and research, or is it merely job training and technocratic streamlining inside a knowledge corporation?

Right from its beginning the Academy, as a form, represented a different way of learning.

- The Academy in its historical sense was nothing more than a little forest, where Plato and his students would 'hang out'; in the grove, in the groove. Perhaps to be seen as little self-organized meetings, but on land already privately owned.
- During the Renaissance Plato's stance was re-discovered. The Academy in its second phase became a collection of learned societies

of amateurs and dilettantes. It can be imagined as a loose and informal gathering for an often interdisciplinary exchange of ideas. The meetings were temporary and not institutional, they attempted to get rid of the old and ossified institutions of the guild system. When eventually they succeeded in doing so, the self-organized learned societies of amateurs and dilettantes created educational institutions themselves, which they called academies.

— Only a hundred years later the institutionalized Academy of the absolutist king came with rules and regulations, with curricular structures and point systems, probably a familiar picture for the absolutist Academy finds its technocratic revenant in the Bologna Process. Not so very differently from the way it works today, the absolutist Academy supplied the court with seasonal styles and delivered aesthetic know-how to increase export options for merchandise.

— Against this technocratic and utilitarian education the Romantic period pitched a return to the idea of the medieval workshop, where the master has the monopoly of education of the apprentices. Conversely, the romantic, autopoietic genius cannot teach how to become a genius oneself — that is why, until today, the Academy has had no

method of teaching or any idea of research — learning at the Academy happens by copying the style and habits of the genius/master. The romantic academy is a place of reproduction.

Dilemmuth summarizes that he prefers to see the Academy:

- as self-organized and temporary,
- not as an institution, but
- as a form of communication, and
- as an activity: making academy,
- which means the reciprocity of teaching and learning,
- as a process of self-empowerment.

But then, Stephan asks, what happens to the institutions if everyone can 'make academy' him- or herself? What are the Academies good for? These questions lead him to institutional research?

Again, Stephan Dilemmuth takes us back on his vita, and recalls how he entered the institution as a kind of barefooted prophet of the extra-institutional academy. He became a professor in Bergen, Norway, pondering in this enclave whether it was possible to think self-organizationally within an institution. Could it be a tool for critically reflecting upon the institution and possibly changing it according to the needs of the students?

At the same time the Kunsthøgskolen in Bergen

was given a government grant and the teachers were encouraged to think up research projects. Dilemuth was confronted with a research advisor, Halina Dusin Woyseth, who suggested that artistic research might be following its own set of rules and traditions, leaving it totally open as to what that might be, and that she could not be of any help there, because it would probably be something completely different to the traditional university research. She could, however, offer an overview of how research would be structured within a university context.

SD, being curious, asked her to continue:

- We usually start with a problem, she says. Stephan admits he has plenty of problems.
- Research usually starts with an inquiry, or investigation into the questions such as who has worked on the problem already, and how, and what were the results?
- But the process of inquiry is not research, it is only a necessary first step. Dilemuth had a feeling — this was at the end of the 1990s — that many artists were undertaking these kind of inquiries and showing the results in institutions, in the form of photocopies of texts they had read and so on. Obviously they were not doing research, they were simply showing their investigated matter.
- The next step in research is to find and determine a specific view of the problem, a specific idea about where and how to approach it. This

- is called the state that has to be questioned.
- Further, the methods to be employed should originate from the researcher's field of expertise. Obviously an artist would use artistic methods before any other.
- Interdisciplinarity makes sense only if there are disciplines in the first place. Interdisciplinarity is not just better in its own right.
- Probably the most important element of research is experimentation. Experiments are necessary to find out if the procedure for approaching the problem works out, and also how the nature of the problem might change through experimentation.
- Probably ninety per cent of all experiments will fail — no worries! — this is inevitable, otherwise they would not be called experiments.
- The reflection of the research process and the evaluation of the outcome of the experiments is extremely important in the research process. Only then can the next experiment be launched.
- There will probably be a sequence of experiments — evaluation, experiments, evaluation and so on — that takes the researcher on a journey into the unknown.
- But who is evaluating this process and its findings? Fellow researchers initially, then a small peer group of experts, then the institutions and the institutionalized critics. A concentric

growth in public perception.

— Exhibitions, manifestos, critical reviews, leaflets, books and other publications may be seen as a part of experimental processes as much as they might help to amplify the public effect of research.

Following this scheme of institutional scientific research, Dilemuth admits his surprise that he could apply everything he had just heard to the field of art in general and artistic practice in particular.

The Academy and the Corporate Public

Being already over time, Stephan Dilemuth continues by hastily introducing the research project that he started in Bergen. He ponders the changes that occur to the idea of the public sphere, predominantly due to the effects of globalization. The national public sphere, in which, ideally, a public debate must take place, is falling apart. Today we have to think of several public spheres fragmented along subcultural, ethnic, gender- and class-related lines, which can overlap, merge, or fall into conflict with each other. Here art and cultural production already play a big part in the analysis and negotiation of problems with identity formation. But what do these fragments have in common? According to SD they are all markets, i.e. they are either already a part of a global market economy, or they are targeted as new markets. Here Herr Dilemuth has spotted a common denominator

that keeps all the fragmented publics together. Does this mean there is a new unity, a new totality on the horizon? And what would that mean for the arts?

Dilemuth continues talking about his project, the relation of research to what he calls the corporate public, and about methods for an art production in a dramatized field. More information can be found on his website <http://societyofcontrol.com/research>.

Being forced to bring his talk to an end, Stephan finally gives the following conclusion, which we, the editors, will quote straight from his manuscript:

Conclusion

‘Finally, artists and researchers, students and teachers, where do you stand? Are we the new court artists? Are we complicit in the new capitalistic rule, representing, promoting and glorifying its triumphant procession around the globe? Is every dissent or criticism absorbed in order to make the criticized stronger and invulnerable? Is there really no other strategy left?’

I think research is never neutral, or solely concerned with its own matter. Research has to consider its contexts and what it is doing to them — and it may even succeed in changing them through insights and findings, through experiments. That is why research in institutions is necessary, but limited.

I therefore have to call bohemian to arms! Bohemian research assumes a new and major role as the last refuge for the unrestricted production of knowledge. Bohemian research is:

- driven by need — it results from existential conditions. It is
- self commissioned — it is research into the most important problems of the everyday. It is
- organized
- a crystallization point for critical thought. It is the last place of political dissent and analysis outside general social control.

While the conflicts are growing more acute, we will continue to live in the ruins of patriarchy and neoliberalism. To shake off its strictures takes perseverance. How can we lay down solid foundations upon which we can construct sustainable knowledge together with others and make it accessible to all? How is this knowledge different from an elitist and technocratic self-acclaimed knowledge society that installs its private claims on the backs of those many billions who still do the dirty work? What we need is research to lead fundamental social change.

Research has to get out of the safe institutions and onto the street. It has to take sides and protect its most important resource — knowledge — against privatization. No patents, no copyright and no controls on access. In order to grow, knowledge has to be made accessible to all and shared by all.

There is so much to do, and research has never been so necessary as it is today. This may be a long way around but it's a whole new game, and a whole lot of fun. Let's go! Now!

Copyright note: This account of Stephan Dilemuth's talk is based on some of his notations and a transcript of one of his lectures. because of the poor sound quality of the original recording this text is a somewhat subjective rendering. however, it is authorized by Stephan Dilemuth himself and can be distributed freely (please do so!) under the creative commons licence, including this endnote. having let it fly, it might happen that its dodgy legitimising potential might be keenly exploited by those it originally set out to challenge. this is why we now invite you, the reader, to consider why it's in whatsoever publication/exhibition, whose interests it serves and the power relations it might help to maintain.

Note from the editor:

This text by Stephan Dilemuth is a reworked version of the lecture that Dilemuth gave at 'The Artist as Researcher' symposium at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague in February 2009. Dilemuth was keen to retain the style of the spoken lecture. He also opted to publish his lecture in the third person, with a shift of perspective at the end.