

A text to MaHKU – Mika Hannula 1.

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Try Teaching This: The Pedagogical Practice of Interventions in Public Space

Pedagogy. Oh my, oh my. This is, I believe, that one thing that most of us can agree upon. An agreement that may not be universal, but nevertheless: pedagogy is vexing, it is problematic, and it is not fun. In short, it is boring. Bloody boring.

Why? Because too often it takes the shape of a clear cut and inflexible sender-receiver model with the former high above, the latter down below – and little or no interaction in-between. Therefore, as an activity, it becomes stale and static. It delivers but does not wait for the rebound. It is a one-way street from which hardly any returns, rearrangements or revisions emerge.

But what happens if and when the relationship between the one who talks and the ones who listens becomes a joint venture of participation? A process of give and take, push and pull, that must have a direction but at the same time has no clearly determined destination? It then becomes an open process that does not deny the hierarchy between, lets say, a professor and a student, but focuses on exchange and inter-action between both participants so that each affects one another. It is a process in which each participant is both part of the solution and part of the problem. As a strategy, it connects the dots, and leaves room for something more to emerge that just the sum of the parts.

This is then pedagogy as an act of teaching that tries to transmit and to push forward knowledge based on ones own experiences (in this specific case: how to organize and conduct exhibitions with students, especially projects based on interventions in public space) in such a way that one constantly learns more about the process – its inherent chances and challenges, possibilities and dead-ends. And even more importantly, this type of articulation of practice-based knowledge opens up and motivates students to make their own decisions and take responsibility for them.

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Experiences. It is hard, if not downright impossible to avoid them. Or to paraphrase an old saying: experiences, for sure, but did there really have to be so many of them?

The point is this: experience - being there, doing that, thinking with and laughing at - is nothing more or less than a beginning. It is, to use the vernacular of academia, a necessary yet not sufficient condition. Experience is where it is at. It is confused, conflictual and contested. It never breaks even, but constantly boils over and cools down. It is never just intentional but results from interplay between different wants, fears, wishes, aims and values. It has its individual and collective dimensions that collide and caress, and it has the dimension of clueing together past, present and the future. In the most effective sense: experience never is, it is made, modelled and shaped. (See Jay 2006, 405)

To give a condensed interpretation of what exactly happens when we are having that thing called a lived-experience, it is worth while to quote Michel Foucault extensively: “Man is an animal of experience, he is involved *ad infinitum* within a process that, by defining a field of objects, at the same time changes him, deforms him, transforms him and transfigures him as a subject” (1991, 124).

So what kind of experience - with a back catalogue of five projects within a five-year period and interaction with well over 50 students - did teaching interventions in a public space at MaHKU amount to?

Before digging deeper into the nuances, it is important to outline the frame and scope of these projects. Starting with the litany of the titles of the projects, these are in chronological order:

- Common Site, Come Inside, Hoograven, at an old carpet shop (2009)
- Collective Individualism, at Expodium, Platform for young art (2010)
- Share the Square, at Academy gallery (2011)
- Longing, Belonging, at Academy gallery (2012)
- Let's Get Physical, at Kapitaal, print house and graphic design shop (2013).

Each event had its subtitle that used the same logic to rephrase the idea of how it was located in the city of Utrecht, how it dealt with the on-going changes within the cityscape of Utrecht, how it tried to narrate an experience in relation to and reflecting on the city, how the project was constructed as an intervention in the city and how works of art based on these interventions were brought into a group exhibition situation.

Each group of students was a sort of a symbolic take on the United Nations. In a group of mostly 10 people origins were plural and differed widely. Along side the native Dutch participants there were always a couple of other Europeans, who were then joined by students from overseas, especially from South-East Asia, or Northern and South America, or, just as an example, from Addis Ababa, Lahore or Teheran. But they did share something significant. They all came from cities, big or even huge mega-cities. However, they were mostly foreigners in the city of Utrecht. Therefore,

it was an unknown terrain with known parameters that afforded us extra playfulness and a new pair of eyes and ears for the interventions.

The project was based on a tight combination of an intervention and a work done for the group exhibition. This dual approach and double task was structurally the core of the activity. Each time, every participant was asked to perform a temporary and immaterial intervention within the frame of the specifically chosen public space and then to turn that intervention into a work of art. It was temporary as opposed to a work that would claim the space for a longer duration, and it was immaterial as in an act that left no visible traces. Everything was cleaned up, so to say, but the experience did leave tracks and traces for those that were part of it. And yes: they were interventions, not performances for an audience or for a camera, and even if they were documented for the sake of gathering material, this was not to be used as a documentary.

The rules were simple. You go out and do something. Make an effect, and through the experience, turn that into an articulation of a work that is connected to your previous ways of working. It was the task of connecting yourself with a new way of working while keeping the ways of expression that you have grown to be familiar with, regardless of the medium you have decided on. Very few things were prohibited, but one thing was crystal clear: this was not a documentary based project, but a project connecting the ‘out’ and the ‘in’, the public and the private.

Thus, it was about going out and experimenting - and worrying terribly about failing - in a field and with a medium that most of the participants were not used to. It was also about playing with the expectations one has – both about the site and about one's way of working with art. Connected to this, the aim was to confront the next stage that was the task of the three T's: T as an in translation, T as in transmitting, and T as

in Transforming. All these three T's were flowing back and forth while the intervention was performed.

The locations for the interventions varied. This brings us to the very first of the projects that was still a sort of try-out version and different from the others. We had the off-space site of a former carpet shop in a run down part of the city that was then under reconstruction. The task was more to deal with the special circumstances of the very site and its location rather than straightforward intervention.



For the second project, the location chosen for the intervention outside was the back of the Hoog Catharijne shopping mall. This was then a strange and often empty square that is called Jaarbeursplein. The participants were asked to perform an intervention there and then – and to deal with this semi-forgotten backside of a huge moneymaking machine of a shopping mall.



The third intervention project took place at the heart of the old city, although still within shouting distance of the shopping mall and the train station that – for good or bad – does dominate the city centre with its bulk of buildings and volume of people passing through it. It is also one of the biggest on-going building sites in this part of Europe, having that fantastic slogan that predicts its time line: See You in Utrecht

2030.

This third location for an intervention was the garden of the former monastery that is partially open to the public.

It no longer served a ‘higher’ purpose and was located as the back



of the HKU music conservatory. The square was a smallish but pleasant with a well-kept garden that had its doors open during the day but which was closed at night.



The fourth intervention focused on the simultaneity of public space as both a physical and mental reality; a day-to-day fact to deal with and to respond to but also a field of imagination, both sentimental and nostalgic, something that was articulated as the two sides of the same sensibility: longing and belonging. This time, there was no exact place for the intervention but

the participants were asked to connect the experiences of a city where they came from with the experiences – anticipations and expectations – with the new environment they now studied and lived in.

The last project returned to the same site as the second one. We were back at the complex and compelling site of the Hoog Catharijne, this time actually focusing on



the circumstances and nuances of what was going inside in this Moloch of an entity. Participants were asked to spend time in the mall, to watch and reflect, to absorb and think - breaking with the very expectation of the site that is there for fast

and furiously designed consuming that leaves very little time and, importantly also very little space for stepping aside and thinking outside of the box.

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What follows, is not a selection of the best of or the worst of interventions or their respective articulations as works of art. These histories are well documented on the MaHKU website. Here are some examples of these these interventions that ranged from a walk in a square, to getting involved in the act of taking care of a garden, from addressing the unique features of the city, to pointing out the serious silliness of our consumer habits by performative acts.

However, what I will focus on here is a synergetic analysis of the projects. What we have at hand is five projects that have the character of 1 + 4, that form a body of experience of teaching interventions in public space that lead to a group exhibition. These experiences are outlined by concentrating on the following three features: 1) The interplay between the given rules and directions and the actual action and intervention, 2) The momentum of allowing both sides of the project – the act outside and the work done for inside – to affect one another, and 3) the ability to move towards a unique and singular take on a subject that is common and general.

1) The interplay between the given rules and directions and the actual action and intervention

It is a so-called known fact that any action, in order to be meaningful and to add up in its inherent logic, needs to have a direction. To have a direction to move in does not indicate that the aim or the destination is already known or decided. A direction implies a chosen strategy of where to look and why you would do so. It is to answer to this riddle: what you find depends on what you are looking for?

The rules for the interventions and the translation of that intervention into a work of art in a group show, were always very straightforward. To say that they were clear to everyone is to tell an unnecessary lie. The initial rules of the game were, indeed, stated in a laconic manner, but what they actually meant for each participant became evident only when they worked through what they might possibly mean for them in their practical actions and decisions. The rules needed to be anchored, situated and interpreted.

The rules for this type of intervention (as a game of a sort) were typically formulated like this: plan and conduct a temporary and immaterial intervention into the

Jaarbeursplein square. This then often enough triggered a set of questions: Can I move away from the square? What is immaterial? And yes, what is temporary?

All these and many other questions were then confronted and discussed in a continuity of group sessions. One question at a time, again and again. This served the task of both highlighting the differences in participants' backgrounds and also to underline the necessity for each participant to navigate and negotiate their own version of the score and the set-up. It was vital to demonstrate that there are neither common nor correct answers, just specific and particular alternative versions of the act. It was also very important that each activity benefited from their partial silliness and their self-evident failures; that the processes kept on trying and failing, repeating and rehearsing. You were constantly kept awake, wide awake by new surprising moments and outcomes – motivating you to empathize and think on your feet, while moving within and along the parameters of the game.

2) The momentum of allowing both sides of the project – the act outside and the work done for the inside – to affect one another

Why interventions? This was another main question that came up every time. It was an honest and productive problem. The pedagogical point of an intervention was again twofold. It was to generate a common agenda and platform for all the students, and a platform that was mostly new territory for everyone. It aimed to lure the students out of their “comfort zone” of just continuing in the paths of their artistic expressions that they had followed before. This luring was, in fact, structurally speaking the most effective act of pedagogy. It asked the students to do something different, something else, and something out of ordinary. It asked them to come along and play – with the expectations, chances and challenges of interventions in a public space.

To send the students out there to “play” and enjoy the articulation of the parameters of a normal activity and then twisting those expectations just so very slightly, was the easy part. In most cases, they took on the task with a productive energy, but often enough, they more or less stalled. This stalling was the effect of asking the interesting thing: does this make sense, and if so, why?

My answer, as a way to motivate each participant to go on and keep on digging deeper into the nuances of both the site and the potential intervention he/she had in mind, was to present an argument for the initial back and forth movement. The claim was this: regardless of what it is that we do when we do what we do when we do it, it is extremely important for that act of a practice to open up and to experiment. You have to get out and do something else – and do it in such a way that this something else bounces back to the core activity of the practice that you are committed to reflect on and take further.

Here the dual structure of the project became the glue that not only kept the process going but also kept it developing and intensifying on a time-line of about six months, from the very first meeting to the end of the exhibition. It was, at first, the abstract notion of the connection of what person A does in his/her own work to the act of this person’s intervention. This duality was not there just to bridge the gap between what was known and what was not, but it was also there to stress the necessary continuity of the practice. This is to say from another angle: we need to experiment, but the experiments must be connected to the core issues and interests of the practice. There is no need to set up any pretentious tasks in imitation of life.

The other main pedagogical part was to convince each person that the intervention was not just a curiosity or an exotic thing to try on and then move back fast to their own sphere of activity. The task was to find continuity throughout the whole process;

basically until the beginning of the installation part, the combination of something ‘outside’ and then something ‘inside’ allowing interaction and comparison between the two.

And of course this aim and wish for interaction is like any aim and wish for reciprocal recognition and an on-going give and take process: it is very seldom achieved but it is always very much worth striving for.

3) Ability to move towards a unique and singular take on a subject that is common and general.

This is the part that highlights the difference between *what* something is and *how* that something is produced and made within a given time and place. It is a difference that cannot be repeated but must be achieved and articulated always on site, in each situation. It is the difference, and the constant interplay between each part, of something being general and specific, common and particular, public and private.

But what public, and what space? Whose version and of what? These questions were part and parcel of the lectures and the talks, presentations and debates that went on throughout the whole process. We were reading a lot of material across the board, ranging from literature on site-specific art projects to the philosophical texts on public space. Here is a quick summary of the reading material for one of our discussion sessions for the 2012 project: Reading material: Bruno Latour, *Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern*, Judith Butler, *Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street*, Malcolm Gladwell, *Small Change*, *Why the revolution will not be tweeted*.

These big, shared themes and issues followed each project until its very end. This was part of both understanding and realizing that anything we do, always roots in a

combination of the individual on the one hand and the social and political on the other. It was also the task of introducing and learning how to use the concepts that are operative in these fields and debates.

To state this with the help of a modern classic of social sciences, G. Wright Mills, it is to connect the dots between one's biography and the structures within which this life is lived. It is to learn to be able to shift from one position to the other, a constant interplay between the micro and macro level, the personal and the collective dimension of activities at hand – and in the air. It is the act of imagination that brings together the personal level (ones aims, fears, troubles and dramas) with the issues relevant at the social and political discourses. (See 2000, 226)

In terms of an experience, having it, transforming it, finally sharing it and then taking it somewhere else, it is to be wide awake in terms of who you are, where you come from and where you are active right now. “To say that you can “have experience”, means, for one thing, that your past plays into and affects your present, and that it defines your capacity for future experience” (Ibid. 196)

This intertwined actualization was not only taking place in terms of micro and macro levels. It was confronted and narrated between the poles of what is known and what is unfamiliar, as it was confronted and narrated in the interplay between what is general and common and what is specific and particular. It should link us to the most classical enterprise of human reflection and story telling. We have to both be aware of what we do and produce a version of whatever we do - it must be both comprehensible for others but also carry within itself an element of surprise.

It is an equation of no inherent balance and no soothing harmony but a constant seeking and losing of the equilibrium that generates the push and the pull, the shake and make of giving content to a concept (a symbol, act, sign etc). An act that does not

happen in vacuum but within the conditions of the conditions of that very act. It is to provide specific and personal content to a common and general issue and a theme. This is not the too simple contrapunctual juxtaposition of public versus private but a positioning of a public issue in a deep and dirty tango with the private interpretation of it. And well, as we do know: in any meaningful relationship, we do need at least two for the tango.

This time, very specifically and singularly, it is the tango for and within a performative intervention. It is between you and me, you and the city, you and your practice and you and your expectations of what, where, how and why, and why not.

Literature

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