

New forms of art schools

Robert Fleck

One can wonder what the current trends are in the world of art schools. Do those trends emerge from institutions? All in all, our schools of fine arts, as autonomous structures, more or less free from the diktat of Academia, are quite recent. They were born more or less with the century that's now coming to an end. This probably means that there is a close interaction, partly subconscious or rarely contested these days, between the school of fine arts which is, on the one hand, open to the outer world and to art as a creative process, and, on the other, modern art as the quintessential legacy of this expiring century.

Are OUR schools the source of a true renewal of art schools as a concept and as an artistic challenge? Or, on the contrary, have our institutions become too cumbersome, too bureaucratic and self-centred to have an influence on current artistic trends? The image art schools have among young artists would make us incline towards the latter opinion. Nowadays –unlike in the seventies – it is rare to see an artist of great talent, aged between twenty-five and thirty-five, who will accept to commit himself to a school of fine arts. Yet the school of fine arts as a concept, as a challenge or as a possible centre for art creation for a younger generation of artists has recently gained momentum. Such a phenomenon should question our schools and make them more critical and especially, more open to transgression.

So if the new concept of art schools does not emerge from our institutions, where can it possibly come from? This renewed interest is not the result of a collective movement either, as twenty-five years ago. In the seventies, several generations of artists and mediators have attacked the institutions, for the third time this century, after Art Nouveau and Bauhaus. Their intention was to transform art through its pedagogy, that is the very core of what it means to be an artist and the relationship of future artists to the rest of the world. During the seventies, such a movement appeared almost everywhere, communist countries included. It was based on utopian values: the school of fine arts was considered a quintessential tool for the transformation of the world, that is at least the world of art (but since more or less all the young artists and mediators were convinced at the time that the art world would serve as the conceptual avant-garde for society as a whole, art schools therefore were to form the basis for the transformation of the rest of society). The teaching of Joseph Beuys in Europe, and the premises of the Whitney Program on the other side of the Atlantic testify until today to this faith in the art school and its teachings in the seventies.

Today nothing of the sort is appearing on the horizon. Although there is an impressive number of artist collectives, art is not dominated by any real collective movement. Utopian endeavours have totally disappeared since the fall of the Berlin Wall, a milestone that also ended the possibility of thinking an alternative society, different in its foundations from our Western capitalist society. In fact young artists are not interested in schools of art as they really are, but in the concept of art schools. Recently, the idea of transmission has made a comeback in the thinking of the younger generation of artists and is often discussed in the studios. Recent works of art contain many ideas on teaching or art pedagogy. But where does this trend come from, if it hasn't emerged in fine arts schools or in any clearly defined movement?

The revival of the concept of art education among young artists is largely the result of the creation of groups of artists which decided in the nineties to unite in order to establish the conditions for the self-financing of their work. This is one of the most important developments in the art world at the turn of the new century. The idea of uniting so as to enable each artist to create autonomously has had a profound influence on the younger generation of artists. The grouping together of artists is often motivated by a longing for independence. Several artists deprived of financial means get together to raise private and public funds which will allow them to produce works or to carry on with an autonomous creative activity. Such groupings have emerged over the past few years without the participation of museums, without the support of institutions that exist in several regions and countries, and often also without any intervention from established contemporary art collections. For the first time since the heroic period of modern art, which did without museums until the end of the forties, a generation of artists, that of today's younger generation, is independent from the establishment, from museums and from official art collections. This phenomenon is characteristic of the younger generation. Nowadays, even young graduates of fine arts schools say massively that they do not wish to embark on the career of an artist constantly seeking recognition, therefore dependent for many years on art galleries as well as private and public collectors simply so as to manage to survive as an artist. In other words, a generation as a whole is seeking to avoid any sort of validation of the relevance of their artistic message by the world of art trade or by the establishment. To a certain extent this is similar to what happened in the seventies, except that these young artists do not have a universalist message, and that they do not, or very rarely, seek security in teaching at established art schools.

This younger generation has therefore massively chosen to self-organise. Independent artistic associations and associative structures have proliferated among the young artistic scene. After the historic wave of " independent curators ", which had a deep influence on the art scene in the nineties, the art scene is now split in two: on one hand, there is the world of art galleries, which has never been more prosperous, first, thanks to its profound renewal over the past fifteen years – all the influential gallery owners are under forty –, secondly, thanks to a massive demand from wealthy collectors, who have benefited from the state of the economy, which is doing well, and also from the Internet, which is a valuable source of information for an enlightened collector; on the other hand, there is a world of young artists which is almost totally independent, and which has united in order to guarantee its autonomy from the

institutions – which have become very powerful in the world of art – and from the art trade, which is also relatively isolated from the new generation of artists despite the commercial success of contemporary creation. It is interesting to note the very limited number of young artists who have crossed the barely visible border between these two worlds over the past years. At the last Basel Art Fair, one could observe the persisting gap between the galleries, dominated by young owners, by relatively old artists, and young or old collectors buying works by relatively old artists, on the one hand, and on the other, the world of young creation, which attracts young talents of all sorts. Somewhat difficult installations, the works of very talented young artists apparently do not sell at all, even if business is good. But it should especially be stressed that this "other world", the self-organised world of young artists, is by no means an "alternative world": practically all internationally recognised young talents, even most of the "shooting stars" share that same origin, and, even more surprisingly, they continue to organise along the same community lines which are characteristic of the self-organised world.

Over the past three or four years, there has been a surprising and deep revival of the notion of the school of fine arts within that autonomous movement of artistic self-production. The comeback of that notion, emanating from movements both radical and very specialised, is all the more surprising that not a single artist in the eighties or maybe even in the nineties seemed to view schools as an essential aspect of artistic life. There had been a few isolated experiences, such as the Art Club in Vienna, created in 1994 by Ariane Müller and Linda Bilda, and which was a true centre of anti-academic thinking on art, and whose origin can be traced in the networks themselves at the origin of the artistic groupings which influenced the art scene in Germany during the nineties, such as Friesenwall in Cologne. Then, Akademie Isotrop in Hamburg created the first independent school of art, which was aggressive, and sought to change the art world through the concept of school. Of course, like the other independent and recently founded schools created since then, Akademie Isotrop is only a self-proclaimed school, with no administrative status. This neo-situationist association is the result of a true "secession" from Hamburg's school of fine arts. Composed mainly of painters, with that mixture of faith in painting, of French situationism and of post-expressionist conceptions which can only emerge in contemporary Germany, Akademie Isotrop and its 35 artists have established as a rule to always exhibit collectively. In a very conscious way, these young students who had broken with Hamburg's school of fine arts constructed their very own education system, with the help of Roberto Ohrt, the author of a book which put French situationism on the agenda in German contemporary art as soon as 1989, and who is probably the sharpest German-speaking art critic. Over the past two years, "Akademie Isotrop" has become a real "shooting star" in Germany, yet it pursues its activity as an independent, unofficial fine arts school, bent on a radical critique of established schools.

Two years ago, a more institutionalised version of those "dissident schools of fine arts" opened in Nürtingen, near Stuttgart. The Freie Akademie Nürtingen, founded by the group of artists ABC, among others Rene Straub, established itself as an associative institution recognised by the Land of Baden-Württemberg. It works today like other established schools, like the Akademie of Stuttgart, nearby, yet with a curriculum far more experimental than its bigger counterpart.

In France, the world of independent and associative artist collectives has been particularly rich over the last few years. The movement probably originated with UR, created by Fabrice Hybert in 1994. Since then it has become a true centre of young talents, from which some learn to be defined as artists because of their work with UR, while others see their works produced by UR. UR is to some extent the main post-diploma or post-graduate program in France today, although it is not a structure with an official teaching activity. There is a striking similarity between the operating mode of UR and the workshop of Joseph Beuys in the Seventies, after Beuys was struck off the list of civil servants of the Land of the Rhineland-Palatinate, even though the practices have changed a lot with the revolution in economic contexts.

Since 1996, many such groups have been created in France, like in Great Britain before. "Glassbox", "Accès Local", "Public" (all in Paris), "Station" (in Nice) or "International Shop" (in Nantes) all come from the idea of exhibiting collectively, inviting others artists and to be financially autonomous for the production of art works. The question of contents came up very quickly: why hold an exhibit together? Why invite other young artists? etc. It is those questions that raised, in an often unexpected manner, the issue of teaching, of the pedagogy of art, of transmission. Without having this goal in the first place, these groups often turned into independent post-graduate programs. To discover why they are together, they organise seminars that are open to students who are still in established schools, they set up teachings that are often original. When they speak in established schools, their proposals seem « out of step » with the traditional operating mode of the school. But these proposals are often pertinent. On our premises at the school of Fine Arts of Nantes, "Glassbox" produced a surprising video surprising reintroducing at the same time very high-level psychoanalysis in the artistic and a terrible criticism on the typical situation of teaching in established schools, even the most open and modern schools like that of Nantes. A great number of these organisations have produced detailed educational projects that currently sleep in the drawers of the administration.

One could describe the same process in Great Britain, in Italy (with the informal school of Michelangelo Pistoletto in Biella, one of better places of art currently existing in Europe), or in Scandinavian countries. After a comprehensive visit in Central Europe, one meets the same desire to go independent as a school. This desire is shared there at the same time by young teachers and by the students, in other words by the whole generation from after the dictatorship which puts up less and less with the authoritarian practices that professors trained under the dictatorship continue to apply with a surprising assurance. One only needs to see the New Academy of Vilnius, in Lithuania, or the independent students group of Cluj-Napoca, in Romania, to realise that we are talking about the same original concept in the end. It would be necessary to reformulate, or even reinvent the school of Fine Arts, born in its

current form with this century and much too constraining (we have to admit that fact) for almost all of the talented students who attend established schools today.

What is currently being created is an International of these new forms of schools of Fine Arts, using the Internet for its co-ordination. If we in established schools are not aware of that, our institutions will soon become as corny as 19th century Academies were with the appearance of Post-Impressionism. All out experimentation of new forms of art schools, like the ones we witness currently with small independent groups, cannot remain without consequences for the teaching landscape.

Until now, this whole revival of the idea of school, particularly present in the younger generation, existed outside our institutions, outside the existing schools of Fine Arts. I am convinced that this is an enormous challenge. This new situation was built without and even against the teaching practices, often well meaning, but somewhat artificial or dated, which dominate higher arts education in practically all countries of the world. These teaching practices can cover various aspects. They can be avant-gardists, academic, neoacademic or postmodern. They can be performed within an institutional framework where the student still remains under the authority of one main professor, or within an institutional framework where on the contrary the student is confronted with various professors. Today, some established schools refuse the right for students to switch from one media to another. On the contrary, other schools allow students to go from one media or field to another. Certain schools require students to come work on location five days a week. Other schools allow students to stop doing anything for a whole year. Thus, there exists apparently a wide range of possibilities in the field of schools of fine arts.

But in reality - and this is the main criticism made by young independent schools - schools of fine arts have a narrower field of possibilities than they themselves believe they offer. In spite of all the innovations brought by the Art Nouveau, Bauhaus and the Sixties, in particular Beuys and the Whitney Program, our schools of fine arts are almost all similar to the 19th century institutions described by Michel Foucault. In other words, they still present an institutional weight that does not seem in phase with our time for the students. Very quickly, the main question for the old institutions could come up as follows: what is the interest for a young girl or a young boy with a strong desire of invention using image, sound or writing, to attend an established school of fine arts, often very institutional in its relationship with young people if more recent, associative structures, mobile and connected to the Internet offer a gateway to the world of creation in a much less institutional manner?

Another characteristic of established schools is that they have very few links to art that is currently produced. I have visited schools of fine arts in about thirty countries. Almost none of those schools had any interest in meeting interesting artists. And even if prestigious artists teach in established schools, they are often very different in their teaching than in their artwork; they often fully use of their authority in their teaching, even though their work is fuelled by existential doubts. In other words, established schools are generally withdrawn into themselves, without real links or with a biased relation with the art of our time. But three simple facts keep institutional schools attracting to the majority of the students: students who begin their courses are often not well informed, otherwise some would join independent schools directly; established schools are currently the only schools to promise a professional future with a five year guarantee; established schools are currently the only schools to receive important public or private funding, that new independent schools do not receive, and they are the only schools for which students can benefit massively from public or private grants. Without these three restrictive conditions, a lot of students would have already turned towards the non-official schools created by young artists.

There is one thing we can be sure of. Trends in art schools, for the upcoming generations of artists, will not emerge from our old institutions, but from the multiple small experimental structures that have integrated the idea of the school in their discursive field. This means that the school of fine arts is a young institution (born at the beginning of the century for its current configuration), which is under attack from different fronts. But reinventing new forms of art schools is a challenge awaited by many at the beginning of a new century. And this in itself is good news.

Bio:

Robert Fleck

Director of ERBAN-Fine Art School of Nantes, France (since 2000)

Born in 1957 in Vienna, art critic and curator.

Latest exhibitions: " The Century of Artistic Freedom ", Wiener Secession, 1998, " Manifesta 2 ", Luxembourg, 1998 (with Maria Lind and Barbara Vanderlinden), 1998-2000 director of studies for the International Post-Graduate-Program at ERBAN- Fine Art School of Nantes, France, invited by Patrick Raynaud, " BIG Torino 2000 ", Torino, 2000, " Actif/Réactif. La création vivante à Nantes ", Le lieu unique, Nantes, 2000 (with Patricia Solini), " Vivent et travaillent à Vienne ", Fri-Art, Fribourg, Switzerland, 2000, " Prodiges ", Espace Paul Ricard, Paris, 2000