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Social Periphery and High Culture

Just after receiving the invitation to this conference, I received another invitation, this time from Hannover, the capital of a northern German state and one of the country's 15 largest cities. The subject: "What should culture look like in Hannover from the point of view of cultural producers and the urban community in 2030?" Those invited to speak included the chairman of the board of directors at a large bank, the business manager of the Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft, the cultural officer of the Deutscher Städtetag (Association of German Cities), and myself, representing the Ruhrtriennale program series *No Education*. I had no money to present, no serious influence in the large world of German culture, or in the world of cultural education, just the idea of a three-year program series at a festival that plays out more or less in the cultural periphery.

My decision to accept the invitation to today's conference has a great deal to do with that second invitation. For it seems that *No Education* has had a cultural-political impact that, for example, convinced Hannover's cultural policy makers that the idea could provide inspiration for the development of cultural practice and cultural policy in their city.

The festival Ruhrtriennale takes place in the Ruhr Region, the most populous region in all of Germany. 5.1 million residents live here across 4.5 thousand square kilometers, in 53 cities and municipalities, making it the third largest metropolitan area in all of Europe! In a sense, THE urban space of Germany, with all the social realities that entails: one quarter of the residents or 37 percent of the children in the Ruhr region have an immigrant background. The average unemployment rate is 11.1 percent. After Berlin, the Ruhr Region has the highest poverty rate in all of Germany. In the structurally weak large cities, twice as many young people are recipients of state support than the average for the state as a whole.

The Ruhrtriennale is an international arts festival. In former factories, mine heaps, and the ruins of mining and the steel industry, each summer the festival presents opera, theater, dance, art and music. The change of cultural director every three years insures that the festival constantly receives new artistic impulses. The annual costs are 14.5 million euros, 80 percent of which is financed by public subsidies.

A marketing survey of the festival has recently distilled the identity of an average Ruhrtriennale attendee: a woman in her late 40s, a college graduate with a mid to high income. The people who attend the festival are those with money and education, whose self-understanding includes attending high-culture events regularly or at least on occasion.

No Education was a series held by Ruhrtriennale's Education and Outreach Department from 2012 to 2014. *No Education* is based on the unrelenting faith that anyone, regardless of their background or their education, can develop a direct, unprejudiced relationship to art. No intermediaries, no mediation is required.

A festival jury was founded to prove this. Over the past three years, almost 300 children and young people have seen all the events at the Ruhrtriennale—and I truly mean each and every one. They were picked up in limousines, entered the venues on the red carpet, always sat in the first row, and spoke with the artists after the events. At the end of the festival, the jury awarded each event a prize in a category of its own definition. The Children's Choice Awards is a project of the Canadian performance group Mammalian Diving Reflex.

These children, aged 11 to 14, represent the periphery in two ways. On the one hand, as being children: "International political economist Alison Watson argues that childhood is not a phase through which all adults pass, but a permanent social category: a class. As a class, children remain the last minority we are legally entitled to discriminate against"¹, according to Darren O'Donnell, artistic director of Mammalian Diving Reflex.

On the other hand, they are representatives of the social periphery of European urban space: The participants all come from schools in so-called "problem areas." At Gesamtschule Gelsenkirchen Ückendorf, for example, the percentage of pupils with an immigrant background is 95 percent. Without the festival jury, hardly any of these children would have attended the Ruhrtriennale—or indeed the theater at all.

With the Children's Choice Awards, the Ruhrtriennale and *No Education* made the social periphery visible to the artists, the audience, and the festival team. This making visible is a key to the project's success. In this way, social reality breaks into the festival; it could not be overlooked or ignored. This project was perceived and discussed, it polarized and was a cause for excitement. The claim that "these" children could encounter art just like a culturally versed adult is a challenge, in the words of Carmen Mörsch, to "unlearn privileges [. . .] and

¹ *Ruhrtriennale, program of the Children's Choice Awards Ceremony 2013.*

to go beyond what we think we already knew, directly engaging with the participants to develop projects of cultural education in a way that leads away from the reproduction of existing relations to actual change."²

Everyone who encountered these children had to decide whether they are ready to engage with this joint change, which ultimately meant nothing less than the integration of the social periphery, at least over the short term. One choreographer wanted to cancel her performance if the children sat in the first row, or if the red carpet were laid out for them. One opera singer initially refused to perform, the premiere could not begin until the children were replaced in with other spectators the first row in a brief and difficult reseating operation: for the children, that was the highlight of the evening. One teacher, whose class was part of the program, cancelled her participation, because she thought the performances are not suitable for the children. The schoolchildren themselves had a different opinion, and concluded the project without support from their school. The spectators also had to come to terms with the bored or hyperactive children, clapping "at all the wrong times". Everyone had to decide how to behave: by negotiating or commanding, insisting on privilege or surrendering just a bit of the hegemonic power held to be so secure.

In his book *Social Acupuncture*, the head of Mammalian Diving Reflex Darren O'Donnell points out: "We must be careful not to simply create projects that glorify the sweet, whimsical and easy, projects that reinforce enclaves of race, culture, art and gender. We need to start engaging with unease and discomfort"³.

No Education brought movement into the standard relationships between children, art, and education. Many of the typical barriers fell—between the generations, between languages and culture, but also between professionals and amateurs, between knowledge and non-knowledge, between center and periphery.

This movement in turn came from a marginal position: the change cultural director every three years, who even chooses the name of the festival, allows for great liberties in terms of cultural policy. The term cannot be extended, no matter what. This fact, coupled with a

² Carmen Mörsch, *Wem nützt das: Kulturelle Bildung beforschen?, Impulsvortrag zur Verleihung des BKM Preises Kulturelle Bildung 2014* in: <http://www.stiftung-genshagen.de/uploads/media/BKM-Preis-Doku2014.pdf>, p. 18.

³ Darren O'Donnell, *Social Acupuncture: A Guide to Suicide, Performance and Utopia*, Toronto 2006, p. 23.

respectable budget, leads to an unbelievable artistic freedom. Each artistic director seeks in his or her three years to set an accent that reveals his or her artistic style.

No Education was a true challenge! In the first year, no foundation was willing to support the project. Official representatives were not prepared to support a project that is directed expressly AGAINST education. It was only in 2013, after the courage and the financial risk of the first year, that No Education was able to gain a partner, Mercator Stiftung. And happily, from the very first year, the founding cultural director of Ruhrtriennale and freethinker Gerard Mortier served as a more-than-fitting patron.

In 2011, *No Education* was developed for the Ruhrtriennale by head dramaturge Marietta Piekenbrock. In 2013, the Rat für Kulturelle Bildung (Council for Cultural Education) published "Alles immer Gut," in which projects of cultural education were freed of all duties to accomplish social tasks: "That cultural education is more helpful for the socially deprived, that it is inclusive, that it is essentially participatory and that it connects people, those are common claims, to be found in innumerable statements. Empirically speaking, such claims stand on shaky ground, in part they are simply false."⁴ That same year, Ruben Gaztambide-Fernández published the essay "Why Arts Don't Do Anything: Toward a New Vision for Cultural Production in Education", in which he argued similarly, showing how differently the term "arts" is mobilized depending on social space and use: "More importantly, discourses of the arts are mobilized to both construct as well as justify different futures for different students."⁵

There was a paradigm shift already in the air when *No Education* was developed, which could be felt in many places. Some examples: In 2007/08 the Unart Festival was initiated, bringing young people on stage as performers with their own ideas. "The underlying concept of education is a self-educative one."⁶ according to project coordinator Sigrid Scherer. At Campo theatre in Gent, Belgium, three performances with children for adults were staged, under direction of well-known artists like Gob Squad Collective or Tim Etchells, starting in

⁴ *Alles immer Gut – Mythen Kultureller Bildung*, Hrsg. Rat für kulturelle Bildung e.V., Essen 2013, p. 24.

⁵ See: *Harvard Educational Review*, Spring 2013 Issue. <http://hepg.org/her-home/issues/harvard-educational-review-volume-83-number-1/herarticle/toward-a-new-vision-for-cultural-production-in-edu>, p. 223.

⁶ Sigrid Scherer, *Partnerschaft zwischen Jugendlichen und Künstlern In: Stop Teaching!* Patrick Primavesi, Jan Deck (Ed.), Bielefeld 2014, p. 306.

2002. In 2008 a symposium and festival called "Stop Teaching! New forms of theatre with children and teenagers" took place at Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt.

In her essay on *No Education*, "Permanently Temporary", Marietta Piekenbrock wrote, "Perhaps festivals are the right tools to widen this perspective. They have the luxury that they can do both: generate good ideas and realize them in the actual world."⁷

The official invitation of the city of Hannover to the event I mentioned at the outset claims that "Without art and culture, cities lack urbanity." On the one hand, I agree entirely. And yet, cultural projects and projects of cultural education often remain without a palpable influence on the development or the future of a city or region. They take place alongside politics, alongside the institutions that have a visible and effective hold on the life of a city. They take place in the periphery.

Darren O'Donnell would respond to the conference organizers in Hannover in the following words—to once again quote from his book *Social Acupuncture*—"Okay, so you want to make culture and creativity a central part of civic life? Fine. Then I want in on the institutions that form—at ground level—the fabric of the city. I want to use these as material in my art practice".⁸

Junge Kollaborationen, the program series developed for Johan Simons, artistic director of the Ruhrtriennale 2015-2017, is trying to live up to that claim and to develop the strategies of *No Education* further. The youth of the first Ruhrtriennale jury founded their own artistic production bureau called "Mit Ohne Alles", located within the festival office. Working together with the festival staff, they will plan and realize one artistic project of their choice each year that will be realized in the official festival program. They become collaborators, working together with professionals on eye level. As Mark Terkessidis points out in his newly released book "Kollaboration", this collaboration is changing everyone participating: „Collaboration means a form of team work, where all players realize that they will be changed within the process. And this change is appreciated."⁹

⁷ Marietta Piekenbrock, *Permanently Temporary In: Program No Education 2013*, p. 31.

⁸ Darren O'Donnell, 2006, p. 24.

⁹ Mark Terkessides, *Kollaboration*, edition Suhrkamp, Berlin 2015, p. 14.