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A standardized studio?

Art and art education under pressure from economization

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 Thoughts on the European Union Policy towards Higher Education"*
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1. Introduction

First of all I would like to thank you very much for the invitation to this conference. It's an honour and a pleasure to speak to so many colleagues from different countries.

The theme of this conference is very important and urgently needs to be discussed. All the more as many of my German colleagues do not realize what is happening to our education system and how its economization poses a threat not only to art education.

Which is, in fact, the theme of my presentation: What does the studio as the foundation of visual thinking have to do with global economy? And what impact does it have on art education?

In order to clarify these questions I will at first point out one aspect of the studio-idea that, in my view, is of special interest in this context. Against this background I will subsequently analyze the process of economization of education that is presently taking place, which was not only initiated by the so called "Bologna-Declaration" but also by several other international organisations. Further, it will become clear how an economized education contradicts the traditional European, humanistic point of view. In conclusion the question of what to do will be posed.

2. The studio as a bridge to the world



*Unknown Dutch artist:
 St. Luke and the Madonna with
 Child, 16th C.*

Since the renaissance, the idea of the artist's studio as the foundation of visual thinking always encompassed the notion of creating a new and independent world. Therefore the artist acquired god-like status. This drawing of an unknown Dutch artist from the 16th century shows Saint Luke as painter of the Virgin and Child who are seated before him *in the artist's studio*. Here the artist is giving expression to a new reality worthy of adoration itself.



René Magritte "Tentative de l'impossible" of 1928

This idea of the *divino artista* equated with the *deus artifex* is also reflected in René Magritte's "Tentative de l'impossible" of 1928: Trying to create man in the studio as god did on the sixth day of creation is like trying the impossible. Yet Magritte's picture itself seems to verify that in a painting the impossible is nevertheless possible. As such it reflects upon the nature of the picture and the problem of reproducing or creating reality.

The fact that the artist is a creator and that art is open to every form of expression led to our modern conviction that art is and should be free. In most democratic constitutions the freedom of art is granted as a form of freedom of thought and expression.

Visual thinking, therefore, is equivalent with free thinking and creating. It is an essential human ability and human right. Based on this, the studio is a place of human freedom and self-realisation.

On the other hand, we cannot deny that modernity has in some respects misunderstood what freedom of art really is: it has become rather arbitrary and disconnected from any demands of the social world. The studio often has become a place in which the artist works in isolation; visual thinking is in danger to evolve into a form of autism. Perhaps the British author and art critic John Berger is right in asking if it isn't an illusion of modernity and even postmodernism to think of the artist primarily as a creator. According to Berger the artist is more a recipient, and what seems like creation is rather a process of forming the received.¹ This implies that the artist in his studio does not only create in mere isolation, but is part of a society, part of a world of people and ideas outside his studio to which he belongs and refers. In this sense visual thinking also means having the world in mind while working in the studio.

This idea of the artist working in his studio while maintaining an inner commitment to the world and its people is manifest in images of the artist's studio from Courbet onwards.

¹ Cf. Berger, John: Berger, John: Schritte zu einer kleinen Theorie der Sichtbarkeit. Ostfildern 1996, p.35.



*Gustave Courbet:
The Painter's Studio, 1855*

You surely know Gustave Courbet's famous picture of 1855, showing him at his easel amidst a crowd of people symbolising contemporary society and his guiding ideas. In opposition to the restrictions of upper-class society the artist portrays his freedom and solidarity with the rest of the population, as well as his affinity to well-known figures, friends and eminent writers and philosophers of his time. Yet at issue here is not the artist's studio as God's workshop but rather as a room full of ideas, of freedom of thought, with the artist remaining in connection to the world outside.

So at best, the studio as the place of visual thinking is a spiritual home for ideas, the home of free thought and expression and creation, from which manifold connections to the world and people emanate. In it the artist lives and thinks and feels in connection with his fellow men, despite his temporary seclusion.

Would not this be an appropriate vision of visual thinking as a quintessential human capacity?

3. The aims of art education

Over time, the two main goals in art education as I understand it have indeed become established:

First, by teaching visual thinking and artistic practice, art education aims at promoting creativity and freedom of thought and expression. Art education endeavours to enrich pupils' and students' personality and to contribute to their self-development and self-esteem. Thus, freedom, time and opportunity are its fundamental prerequisite.

Second, individual self-development in education is inevitably bound to social responsibility. As our goal is to educate responsible human beings rather than self-centred egoists, an inner connection to the world as proposed for the artist in his studio is a moral imperative in art education. Art education must be committed to the common good (*bonum commune*).

The studio idea as outlined above is, I think, a fitting metaphor for art education in its function to promote knowledge, ability and personality in an interchanging process with the world and its fellow men.

4. Economization of education

If we now take a look outside our studio we have to recognize that over the past several years these principles of education have become increasingly put to risk by commercialism in public education all over Europe.

I would like to point out just a few of the new processes and principles that can be observed:

The neoliberal globalisation of economy has relegated the human being to a status of mere human capital. His individual personality is increasingly being rejected as the aim of education. Instead, only basic knowledge and skills are trained - at the lowest cost possible; above all individuals must remain flexible and adaptable to changing market demands. Some creativity may still be necessary (although this of course not has much in common with our concept of it). Education must now serve instant profit, must meet the short-term demands of the economy.

Schools and universities are increasingly being managed as business companies and forced to follow the imperatives of the so called "New Public Management" - a technique of leading non-commercial public institutions according to the business principles of competition, cost-benefit-calculation, controlling, benchmarking, monitoring and so on. This mode of removing public education from state authority means that we as citizens lose democratic control over our own schools.

Education as output-orientated and managed as a profitable business means that it must be standardized on comparable international levels. A paper on education by the *World Bank* states explicitly:

"An orientation toward outcome means that priorities in education are determined through economic analysis, standard setting, and measurement of the attainment of standards."²

Setting standards in turn needs measurable units. Therefore the complex process of education is reduced to a number of measurable skills. At high schools this is called modularisation of studies: modules are exactly the needed form of standardized education packages.

These reduced learning-units are also very conducive to e-teaching and internet-learning and can be sold around the world. As a result, it is not surprising that e-learning and new media for schools and universities are the object of massive propaganda these days. Many companies want to profit from the huge market that these learning-products and educational services pose: EU countries spend 115 billion Euros per year for education; the worldwide education-market is estimated at 2000 billion Dollars.

It's obvious that it is impossible to dissect the complex aims of a humanistic education, with its concern for the whole personality, into standardized and measurable units and skills. Any attempt to do so would strike at the very heart of education and especially art education itself. Or can you imagine a standardized studio?

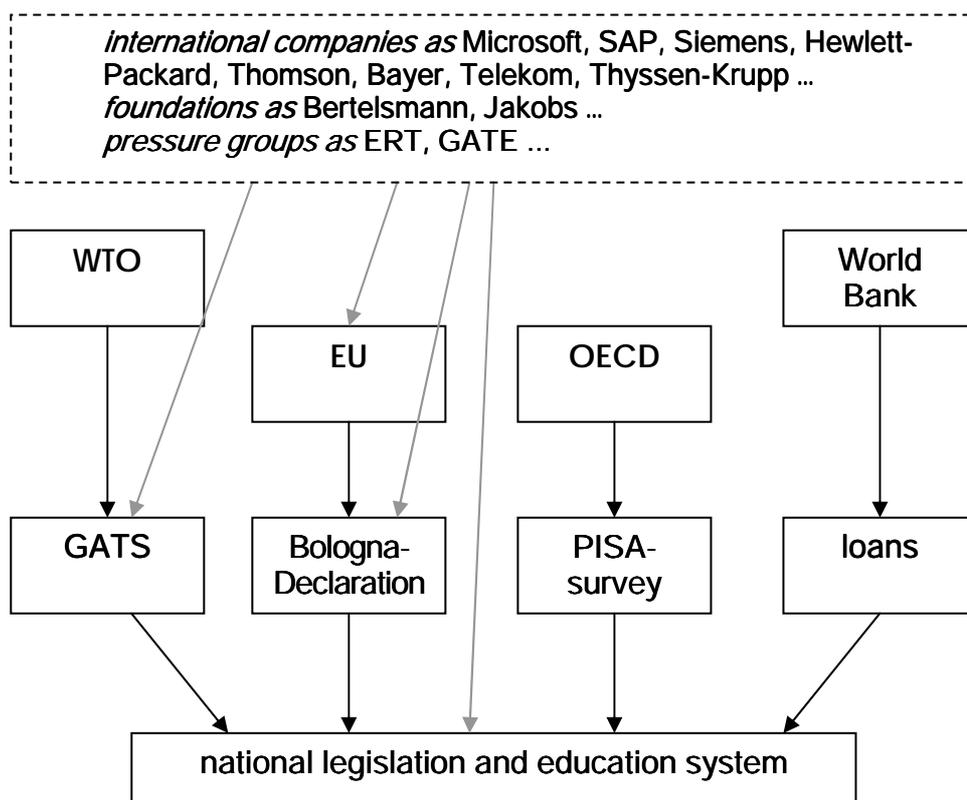
The new aim of education is to produce a *homo oeconomicus* who lives for the benefit of a neoliberal global economy, where the weak will fall by the wayside, and where the privatization of education and its concomitant rise in costs will deprive children and students from the underclass of access to good education.

This strikes at the very foundations of public education, which - in an effort to promote freedom, democracy and social responsibility - was once established after hundreds years of struggle to prepare individuals of all classes in their duties as citizens.

In transforming education into a commodity its essence, its humanizing and civilizing power is thus lost. In fact education is *not* a commodity but a *human right*, as article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states: "Everyone has the right to education. (...) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality (...)."

² World Bank: Priorities and Strategies for Education - A World Bank Review. Washington 1995, p. 94. (http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDS_IBank_Servlet?pcont=details&eid=000009265_3961219101219)

5. The political context



Let us now take a look at the institutions promoting this.

In this chart we see that several international institutions are trying to influence or force national states to change their education system (the same is happening to other public services such as public health, public transport, water supply etc.).

I don't claim this survey to be complete; I just arranged the parts of the puzzle I came across up to now.

First of all you see that the *Bologna-Declaration*, the main topic of this conference, is just one component of a broad top-down-strategy. For reasons of time I will just mention the other actors shortly and then take a closer look at this Bologna-declaration and its impacts.

The first main international actor is the *World Bank*, whose concept of education was mentioned earlier. By means of credit-obligations, the *World Bank* forces developing countries in particular to rationalize, commercialize and privatize their education systems and to bring down costs.

The *World Trade Organisation* (WTO) as second actor is very crucial. Since 1995 negotiations on the *General Agreement on Trade in Services* (GATS) have been held among the WTO members. GATS seeks to liberalise trade in *all* public services. The negotiations take place at the exclusion of the public. Almost no one knows that the EU has already cleared the way for educational-service-trading. State control and public funding of education is abolished as a free-trade barrier in order to allow investors from abroad full access to national schools and universities.

On the European level the *Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development* (OECD) uses its school-efficiency-tests as the PISA-survey to exert public pressure on governments to change their education systems. The OECD frankly admits its aim

of "getting to grips with globalisation" and to therefore "influencing the behaviour of sovereign states" by peer-reviews³. As the questions of the OECD-tests are clearly orientated towards the described *homo oeconomicus* they help to implicitly establish new standards and aims of education.

So at last the *Bologna-process* appears as the European strategy for preparing high-schools and universities for the world market. On this behalf European ministers of education agreed in the Bologna-declaration of 1999 and its follow-ups to "harmonize" - this means standardize - studies by implementation of Anglo-American BA/MA-degrees, by modularisation of studies, by the so called "European Credit Transfer Systems" and by common criteria for evaluation.

Remarkable and important is the fact that the Bologna-declaration has never had and has not yet the status of international law⁴ (as have the GATS-conventions). It is no more than a declaration of intent of some ministers. No country is forced or obliged to implement the declared tasks. But at least in Germany - I don't know how it is in Greece - a huge media-campaign has been undertaken suggesting that we *must* do this now. This is *simply a lie* and we can reveal it as a lie.

And not to be forgotten in my little chart: Above and between all this are many international, quite well known companies who exert their influence on negotiations, politicians and the public.

Just one striking example for their kind of lobby-work is the *European Round Table of Industrialist* (ERT), an assembly in which most important business-companies such as Nokia, Nestlé, Deutsche Telekom, SAP, Siemens, Fiat, Shell, British Petrol and so on are represented. The ERT frankly states its aim to put pressure on the European Commission and the European Parliament as well as on the national governments and parliaments and other opinion-formers and the media to remodel their education systems according to the economic principles mentioned above.⁵ Their reports and position papers are unmistakably the blueprint for the education-policy of the EU.

6. Bologna and its consequences

The consequences of Bologna are being felt by all: studies are cut short, the BA-degree encompasses only three years of study (unlike the USA where it is four years!), MA studies are restricted to 20 percent of teaching-capacities (as in my country⁶), we have to modularize the topics of our studies. Students are permanently tested and evaluated by credit-points. This results in many students mainly checking off their modules rather than deepening their personal studies. In consequence university studies have the quality of school-teaching. Leisure and individual interest are no longer in demand; because of the tuition fees time is money now.

The crucial point is that cutting study disciplines into incoherent pieces leads to a kind of patchwork-knowledge which is tested and can be forgotten afterwards. Not *truth* but *usability* becomes the main criteria for scientific knowledge and research.

In art studies there are unsolvable problems: studio-work cannot be standardized and immediately tested and judged by credit-points. The development of artistic abilities and an artist's personality is not predictable. That doesn't imply art cannot be taught. But how a student develops his abilities is not a matter of standards.

³ OECD: Getting to Grips with Globalisation. The OECD in a Changing World (2004), p. 23 (<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/43/23/31499355.pdf>).

⁴ Cf. Schiedermaier, Hartmut: Was kommt auf die Universitäten zu? Die Folgen des Bologna-Prozesses für die deutschen Hochschulen. Vortrag 24. September 2003, Universität zu Köln.

⁵ Cf. www.ert.be.

⁶ Cf. Ministerium für Wissenschaft und Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen: Einführung gestufter Studiengänge, hier: Landesspezifische Strukturvorgaben. Erlaß vom 16.02.2005.

At my university students increasingly ask what they *have* to do and not what they *want* to do. Inner commitment to artwork is lost instead of fulfilling obligations.

And the worst is: No one is interested in the fact that art studies cannot be adapted to standards of modularisation. Either it works, or the art department closes, which almost happened to our own study course for art teachers.

The example shows too that the humanities and arts are the first to be abandoned. In the German Federal state of Hamburg 50% of the humanities shall be closed because they don't fit the needs of the job market and the local economy, as the government stated.⁷

7. What to do?

So to round up our consideration I would like to return to the beginning:

What is happening outside our studio today is brutal and inhuman, as John Berger states again: judging everything only by the value of increasing profit is "(...) the absolute fanaticism. And it is a fanaticism of such a triviality, if you think about the needs and the structure of the human spirit (...)." And it produces colossal injustice, as Berger also claims.⁸

So what is art's function in this situation? I think George Steiner gives an important hint when he says:

"One of the radical spirits in current thought has defined the task of this sombre age as ‚learning anew to be human‘. On a more restricted scale, we must, I think, learn anew what is comprised within a full experience of created sense, of the enigma of creation as it is made sensible in the poem, in the painting, in the musical statement."⁹

I think this encompasses the very heart of our studio-idea and of the possible role of art and art education: We can learn and teach humanity.



*Theo Danecker:
Visit to the artist's studio, 2004*

Another example of a contemporary studio-picture, shown here, may demonstrate this. This painter shows us in his sketchy, open and seemingly incomplete manner of painting that even today the ideas of humanity, peace and freedom may affect an

⁷ Cf. Bitzmann, Andreas: Geisteswissenschaften - Harte Zeiten für kluge Köpfe. Rheinischer Merkur Nr. 31, 04.08.2005 and Expertenkommission zur Begutachtung der Hamburger Hochschullandschaft: Strukturreform für Hamburgs Hochschulen - Entwicklungsperspektiven 2003 bis 2012. (<http://fhh.hamburg.de/stadt/Aktuell/pressemeldungen/2003/januar/30/kommissionsbericht-hochschulen-lang,property=source.pdf>)

⁸ John Berger quoted from: „Liebe, Tod und hohe Berge. Ansichten des Schriftstellers John Berger.“ A film of John Albert Jansen. Westdeutscher Rundfunk 1997.

⁹ Steiner, George: Real Presences. Is there anything in what we say? London 1989, p. 4.

artist's work in his studio: Here we see Picasso having small-talk with Goya, there Erasmus of Rotterdam meets Leo Tolstoj; Ghandi is over there writing on non-violence; we find the philosopher Immanuel Kant, educationalist Heinrich Pestalozzi, writer Romain Rolland, physician Albert Schweitzer and other persons of history known for promoting peace. And over there we see a folding rule that should remind us of the antique *homo-mensura-motto*: man is the measure of right actions and the good life - and not economic profit.



Fitting in this context we find on the left a documentation of pupils' artwork in the artist's studio in front of the studio-picture after discussing it with the artist himself. Here the artist, teacher and pupils are unified in the studio as the foundation of visual thinking in the proposed broad sense.

On the political level I also feel hope is possible. First of all I think we should talk to our colleagues, students, friends, neighbours and all concerned fellow citizens. As we are the people we have to gain back democratic control. And this works - so is my conviction - not at first on a global and abstract level, but by personal interchange on local or international levels. I think this conference is a very good example how we can work together on a personal level and in an honest way.

And there are encouraging examples for this: I just came across a declaration of several German educationalists from different universities stating clearly that the educational system is no business corporation and inviting all colleagues to a conference in October.

Some weeks ago I met with some professors of technical high-schools who suffer from the same Bologna-effects as we do in art and art education. We decided to invite to our next meeting people of other professions as physicians, nurses, kindergarten teachers, social workers and also farmers who all are under compulsion of the neoliberal agenda of GATS and EU.

But also in the political arena there are voices of reason: There is an *Assembly of European Regions* who very clearly warns of the consequences of privatization and liberalisation by the GATS. And - hard to believe but true - in 2003 they even passed an appeal on art education entitled "Is the *homo ludens* turning into a *homo oeconomicus*?" The ministers of many European regions

„unanimously agreed the following:

- to regard the expression through arts and the development of creative and perceptive abilities in arts as fundamental to the human existence,
- to insist on arts as a basis for stimulating and activating in a comprehensive way the given abilities of mankind,
- to view cultural education as a key competence that both encompasses and shapes the lives of everyone,
- to underline that gaining and improving skills in creativity and imagination, interpersonal cooperation, motivation and self-reliance are strong reasons for making the arts a core subject of all education systems,
- to view, therefore, harmonisation of educational systems as not appropriate when trying to reform education, because schools must practice diversity and also reflect the cultural diversity of the regions in which they are located.”¹⁰

In conclusion, at least we all know that art is a weak thing in times of political pressure. But what it can do is give hope and courage to our lives. Anyway nowadays we must step out of our studio and see what's going on in the world outside for ourselves.

This is what the photographer Robert Adams puts in very appropriate words:

"And though poems and pictures cannot by themselves save anyone - only people who care for each other face to face have a chance to do that - they can strengthen our resolve to agree to life."¹¹

Thank you very much for your attention!

¹⁰ Assembly of European Regions: Final Declaration of the Conference "'Homo ludens' versus 'Homo economicus'", Budapest - 24th & 25th October 2003 (Unanimously adopted by the Conference in Budapest on 25th October 2003. Unanimously adopted by the AER General Assembly in Poznan on 27th November 2003.) (<http://www.are-regions-europe.org/COMMUN/A214a1.html>)

¹¹ Adams, Robert: :Beauty in Photography. Essays in Defence of Traditional Values. New York 1996, p. 70.