

# ON THE LINE: ART SCHOOLS AND THE REFORM

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“Where the danger grows, grows also what saves”  
Hölderlin, *Patmos*

As readers will be aware, art schools have of late been of sustained interest to a certain number of entities who previously paid them much less attention. From the world of art to the world of higher education, from the Culture Ministry to regional and local government, who share responsibility for them, ongoing debates and discussions have attested to the importance accorded to these privileged venues of artistic higher education. Obviously, this is due to the reform of art teaching, which has focused attention on its object and revealed what is at stake there. But the converse could also be true, namely, that it is because they concentrate so many key issues that art schools are undergoing such sweeping reforms. One thing at least is certain: today, art schools are in an advanced critical state, in both the active and passive senses of that word: they are critical (leading to a crisis), and in a critical state (in crisis). What is at stake in this crisis and in the reform? What are the risks and the hopes? This article attempts to answer these questions from the viewpoint of the schools, considered both generally and in their singularity.

## SPECIFICITY

The specificity of art schools in the world of higher education is closely bound up with their history. For reasons that it would take too long to go into here, but which basically have to do with the historical primacy of the intelligible over the sensible<sup>1</sup> in western thought in general and in Cartesian thought in particular, art teaching in this country developed on the margins of the school and university system. This marginality led art schools to shape the principles of their functioning in accordance with particular procedures derived from the field of art and not higher education. Hence their critical position with regard to a number of rules, protocols and procedures characteristic of the university system.

In opposition to the metaphysical primacy mentioned above, with its hierarchy of the intelligible above the sensible, they have put forward, if not a strict reversal, then at least a more subtle articulation of these values, arguing that the intelligible is never manifested independently of its sensible form, and that the meaning and value of theory can be tested only in practice. By the same token, where the university measured the legitimacy of its alumni—whether as potential teachers within its structure, or members of the profession it trained them for—by the degree and grade it delivered, confirming a level of training converted into a level of competence, whatever the professional activity eventually practiced, art schools clearly separate the training that they provide from legitimization, which is left to the judgment of actors in the world of art. Although it is provided mainly by artists, art school teaching in itself is never enough to make an artist. And, instead of the cumulative, full conception of the period of learning which governs higher education, art schools practice the irregular and discontinuous logic of experimentation, which has been the *modus operandi* of art ever since modernity. This takes into account the decisive role played in the creative process by error, moments of drift and deadlock. Finally, rather than the partitioning of disciplines and specialties, which implies a system of individual evaluation, they put forward a sense of overall perception and collegial evaluation, taking the tensions and disagreements inherent in this kind of functioning as fecund moments in the formation of judgment.

## REFORM

This is the original model that the reform now has in its sights. With the stated objective of inscribing French art schools in the “European space for higher education,” as foreseen by the 1999 Bologna Declaration, the reform of higher artistic teaching is generally presented as an operation in two parts: a pedagogical part to ensure conformity with the three-tier European degree structure of BA-Master’s-Doctorate, involving the attribution of Master’s status to the French *Diplôme National Supérieur d’Expression Plastique* (DNSEP),

<sup>1</sup> Here I refer to the diagnosis elaborated by Derrida as of his earliest texts, according to which western thought is organized around opposing pairs

ordered within a conceptual framework derived from metaphysics and resting on the Platonic break between the sensible and the intelligible.



*Arcadia Borderlines (ou la trop-pas utopie)*, adaptation libre d'*Arcadia* de Dan Graham, réalisée par des étudiants de l'École supérieure d'art et design de Saint-Etienne dans le cadre d'un *workshop* mené par Sandy Amerio, du 23 mars au 3 avril 2009. *Free student adaptation of Dan Graham's "Arcadia" by an atelier in Saint-Etienne*. Ph.DR

following a period of assessment by the Agence d'Évaluation de la Recherche et de l'Enseignement Supérieur (AERES, the inspectorate of higher education); and an administrative part involving the legal, pedagogical and academic autonomization of regional schools, a process involving the transformation of these establishments which, hitherto, were mainly directly controlled municipal entities, into what is defined as an Établissement Public de Coopération Culturelle (EPCC). But this presentation is at once too general and too narrow. While there is no reason to contest the goal of the reform, it is essential to analyze and recontextualize it.

### IMPOSITION

What such an analysis reveals is that, in various aspects, a university model is being imposed on a locus that contested it. This is case with the application of the so-called European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), which constitutes the very basis of the creation of a single European space of higher education, the consequence of which is that the student's working time is divided up into units that can be added up, therefore imposing a cumulative, partitioned notion of learning on artistic education. Thus, the notion of the "progressivity of the teaching" implies continuity, homogeneity and gradation, whereas art school teaching proceeds by the discontinuous and sometimes regressive mode of experimentation. Or, likewise, the way schools are being encouraged to attribute theoretical teaching posts to university PhDs, to which is added the obligation of having them chair the juries assessing student theses. This is where the forceful imposition of university criteria is most obvious, not only because it is manifested as such, but also because it reveals the metaphysical assertion of the primacy of theory and of legitimization via grades and diplomas. The determination to link art schools to the university model is also clearly stated in the latest circular by the Direction Générale de la Création Artistique. There we learn that the "grounding in research," which is one of the essential features of the Master's level, "consists in a series of partnerships to be forged primarily with the University," or that, "the rapprochement with universities" should lead higher art schools to gradually join Poles of Research and Higher Education (PRES)."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Circular from the Directeur Générale de la Création Artistique to the prefects and to the DRACs, dated April 13, 2011.

If we now consider the general context of this reform, it clearly tends to confirm the idea that a movement is afoot to absorb art schools into the world of higher education. By context, I am referring more generally to the current time, and above all to the growing dominance of economic reason. There is a whole part of the reform that can be understood only in the light of the General Revision of Public Policies (RGPP) initiated by the French government in 2007 with the aim of reducing public expenditure in accordance with a so-called logic of rationalization. One of the key planks in this approach is regrouping institutions to form poles: at the top, the Culture Ministry, encouragement is given for the creation of poles of excellence in artistic teaching, in the form of multidisciplinary and multi-site establishments,<sup>3</sup> which are simultaneously being urged to join up with higher level poles, the PRES, governed by the higher education ministry. To this first feature of the general context we can add a second, which gives an idea of just how valuable the art schools are today: the growing value attributed by the economic model, and by society more generally, to processes deriving from the world of art. This aspect of the zeitgeist is what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have called “the new spirit of capitalism,” a phase that we could also describe as cognitive or aesthetic. Putting the emphasis on working in “project” mode and organization in terms of networks, placing value on imagination, freedom and experiment, and using technological apparatus to abolish the distance and frontier between work and non-work, this spirit is tending to absorb the values and *habitus* of the art world and to position creativity as the main creator of added value.<sup>4</sup>

In such a context, art schools can be seen as a precious auxiliary for other higher education establishments. That is the meaning behind the statement by the minister for higher education and research, Valérie Pécresse, in favor of “breaking down the divisions between higher education and artistic and cultural teaching.” The minister stated, “My wish, today, is that poles of higher education and research should open wide their doors to art schools and establishments under the stewardship of the Culture Ministry. They have every reason to be there, even in scientific poles and campuses as at Saclay: this would make it possible to open up new horizons and perspectives for all our students, on the level of cultural life, of course, but also from the viewpoint of training.”<sup>5</sup> A similar kind of interest led Sciences Po in Paris and the École Centrale and the École de Management de Lyon to develop, respectively, master’s degrees in art and politics and an Ideas School, both of which have courses in artistic practice and, more generally, are hoping that the artistic dimension will offset the overly formatted character of their training.<sup>6</sup>

Here we can gauge the ambivalence of the reform for art schools—and the narrowness of the path these schools have taken. On one side, never before have they been so valued by society and the higher education system; on the other, the contestation which is part of what they are, and which is what defines their specificity and their value, is threatened with neutralization by assimilation. It is the conjunction of these two tendencies, and through them the problematic articulation of the old and the new, of the same and the other, that literally constitutes the crisis, that is, the decisive moment, being experienced by art schools today. Despite the temptation of nostalgia and its melancholy desire to go back in time, or of the heroic desire for refoundation, this situation needs to be dealt with, in the first place because art schools have a responsibility to future generations. Yes, a process is under way, a process that seems literally and figuratively to be removing the schools from their site by projecting them into the field of higher education: but the schools now need to choose their position in this field. A broad range of positions is possible, and they occupy the space between the two main—and opposing—conceptions of the artistic field, which often coexist within individual schools. One sees that field as heteronomous, and in the past was embodied by communications studies, and is now exemplified by design, which is the privileged interface of art schools when they are open to other higher education institutions. The other sees art as autonomous, a position still supported by the visual art options that all schools should offer. Its development is instructive.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> On this point, see the measures implemented by Culture Ministry on the site dedicated to the RGPP ([www.rgpp.modernisation.gouv.fr](http://www.rgpp.modernisation.gouv.fr)) and the Rapport sur les EPCC written in June 2010 by Michel Berthod, downloadable on [www.culture.gouv.fr/mcc/Actualites/Missions-et-rapports](http://www.culture.gouv.fr/mcc/Actualites/Missions-et-rapports).

<sup>4</sup> On all these questions, see Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Gallimard, 1999; Yann Moulier Boutang, *Le capitalisme cognitif. La nouvelle grande transformation*, Ed. Amsterdam, 2007; Olivier Assouly, *Le capitalisme esthétique*, Le Cerf, 2008; Pierre-Michel Menger, *Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur. Métamorphoses du capitalisme*, Le Seuil, 2003, and *Le travail créateur. S'accomplir dans l'incertain*, Gallimard/Le Seuil, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Speech given by Valérie Pécresse in Avignon on October 5, 2010, on receiving the report of the “Culture and University” commission.

<sup>6</sup> Founded in 2010 by Bruno Latour, the experimental MA in arts and politics is presented as “an innovative program combining the social sciences, the arts and politics.” With a planned opening in 2012, Idea School is a “management school based on the new technologies, with a large number of courses in art, design and social sciences.” In both cases, artistic practice is put forward as a supplement of value in a situation of crisis, whether of the economy (the second case) or of political representation (the first).

<sup>7</sup> On the forms of this bipolarization and related issues, which are both aesthetic and political, see Laurent Jeanpierre, “L’art contemporain au seuil de l’entreprise,” *Valeurs croisées*, Les Ateliers de Rennes – Biennale d’Art Contemporain #1, Les Presses du réel, 2009.



Antoine Aubert, *Hell's Angels*, 2009  
 Peinture aérosol sur panneau de bois imprimé.  
*Spray paint on printed wood panel*  
 Court. école supérieure d'art de l'agglomération  
 d'Annecy | Ph. DR

More generally, while the reform is certainly the index of a powerful movement of normalization, it also brings promising measures and projects that, in certain conditions, could help improve and strengthen artistic training. Take, for example, the general practice of the thesis required by the Master's degree. Providing its form is not constrained by excessively academic stipulations, it could provide a way of defining or documenting a body of artistic work, or an opportunity to explore a plastic relation to language via a highly singular style (that could be one definition of poetry). Along similar lines, the idea of bringing the visual arts together with the performing arts and/or music may make sense if we bear in mind the increasing porosity between these different fields, as attested by the revival of interest in performance and the development, since the 1990s, of various forms of crossover between live performance and visual arts, on the edges of theater, dance, music and visual imagery. Also, the fact that research should be explicitly posited as a major issue is another piece of good news, since it gives the schools the chance to win back some of the specificity that is being denied them in terms of training. For this is a unique opportunity to create and develop a field of specifically artistic research, based on the heterodox principles of the art world. Paradoxically, today it is to the art schools and their tradition of hospitality that we can look to achieve the idea of the "University" as formulated for example by Derrida, in the form, notably, of a place of "unconditional resistance" that would "give priority to non-legitimacy."<sup>8</sup> Going beyond university references, however, the emergence of such a form of research could help artists rid themselves of what Txomin Badiola has called their "epistemological shame," meaning "a kind of incapacity to trust their own tools,"<sup>9</sup> and thus contribute to obtaining recognition for their heuristic and cognitive productiveness. Finally, because it projects the schools into the world of higher education, the reform should also provide the opportunity to really get to grips with the insistent and decisive question of the status of teachers, by envisaging, not only a simple upwards revision of conditions, as is sometimes mooted for teachers in local art schools, who don't enjoy the same advantages as their colleagues in the nationally-financed schools, but also the creation of a real professional status, that of teacher-artist-researcher, which would properly reflect not only their responsibilities in terms of higher education, but also the decisive role played by art in today's world.

#### ON THE LINE

However, there is nothing to say that these hopeful prospects implicit in the reform will be automatically turned into reality. There is a thin line between the normalization of a difference and the consolidation of a singularity, a line that is at once a crest and a front line. For the schools to hold this line, it is vital that they should be united and able to count on their natural ally and the institutional authorities, namely, the art world, the Culture Ministry and local and regional government. That is the least we must hope for if the reform is not to be yet another step towards the flattening of all difference and singularity in that "shredding of subjectivity" that Félix Guattari diagnosed some twenty years ago now, and to which he opposed the resistance of artists, who "always try to come back to the point of emergence of the production of subjectivity, for themselves and for the collective entity."<sup>10</sup>

Translation, C. Penwarden

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *L'Université sans condition*, Galilée, 2001, p. 15, "Chaire vacante : censure, maîtrise, magistralité," in *Du droit à la philosophie*, Galilée, 1990, p. 349.

<sup>9</sup> Txomin Badiola, "Lettre à un collègue (sur la vérité, la politique, l'archive et la

forme)," 2006, reprinted in the exhibition catalogue *La forme qui pense*. Txomin Badiola 96-06, Musée d'Art Moderne de Saint-Etienne Métropole, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Félix Guattari, "Félix Guattari et l'art contemporain," *Chimères*, no. 23, 1992.

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