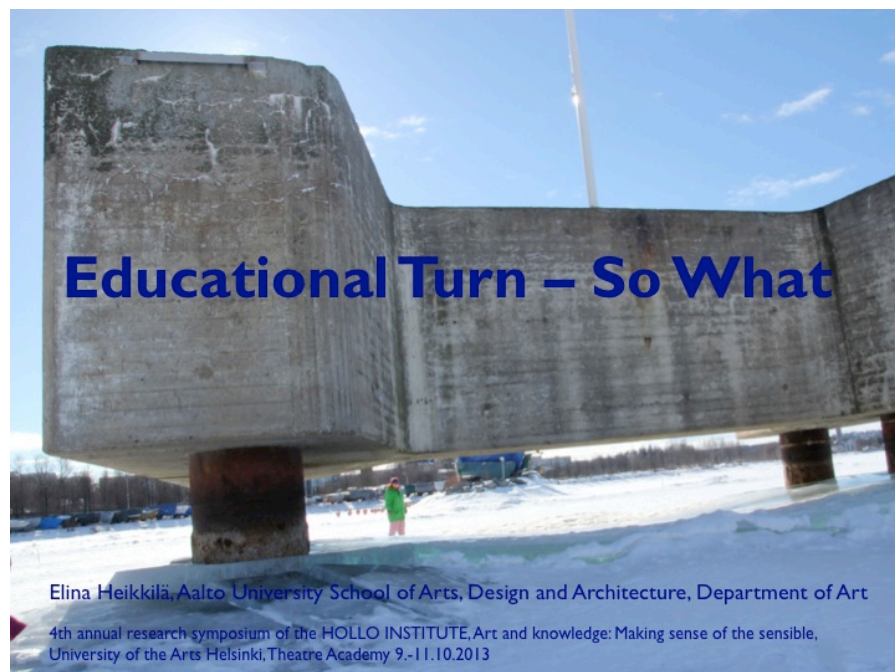


This text is based on a presentation given at the 4th annual research symposium of the Hollo Institute: *Art and Knowledge: Making sense of the sensible* at the University of the Arts Helsinki, Theatre Academy Oct 9th to 11th 2013

Elina Heikkilä

Educational Turn – So what?



Background

I graduated from the University of Art and Design, Department of Art Education, fifteen years ago. In my final work I explored the chiasmas between my life world and the art world. I remember that I read Douglas Crimp's book *On the Museum's Ruins*, and followed the discussion about Kiasma as it was being built, and I remember its first pedagogues being chosen. There was talk about the death

of painting, there was Minna Heikinaho's work "Push Firma Beige"¹, and I recall how I was wondering about the essence of art.

After graduating, I started to teach art in secondary and high school, and then in an adult education centre. New challenges kept me busy. After having spent four years in Germany as a housewife and mother, I returned to Aalto ARTS because I was missing this little glimpse of research that my final work had given me – it had opened a new world for me. The passing of more than ten years after graduation had made a difference, but how? I had to situate myself again. While teaching, I had had difficulties in finding a comfortable role as an art teacher. But during these years neither had I attempted a career as an artist, nor got a job in a museum. All that stayed with me was this problematic experience as an art teacher, the experience of art as a maker and a spectator, years overseas – and in the background, my own strong experiences from how I was brought up. It seemed that I could not escape educational questions. It also seemed that I could not escape questions about contemporary art, as the interest in it had stayed with me all these years. So now, in my ongoing research, I am investigating questions relating to the institutional power of upbringing and education in the light of contemporary art strategies.



After spending years at work and as a housewife, it took time to get in to the present discourse on research in art and education, but I gradually started to see

¹"Push firma beige, 1996-2001, place of action space in Kallio, Helsinki. This was an experimental, local, educational, exhibition and working place in an urban space." http://www.saasanoa.com/push_en.html (Haettu 27.11.2013)

similarities between strategies of artists, museum pedagogues, curators – and art educators. Something had happened and was happening around me, in the field of contemporary art and education that I am now trying to formulate.

I want to mention two occasions to start with: “It’s all mediating” – a seminar held in Kiasma last spring,² and “Ihme-päivät”, held in Vanha Ylioppilastalo this spring³. Both of them helped me to see that the questions I was pondering and remarks I had made were relevant and visible here and now.

Before going to those questions I will give a little bit of background from my field. As becomes clear in Pirkko Pohjakallio’s (2005) thesis: “Why art education? – The fluctuating justifications for art education in schools”, there are so many turns and no clear continuum to be seen. Because of different paradigms and traditions, the focus and justifications of the subject have been changing. However, as the name of the subject implies, art is somehow there. But the discussion of its place is still ongoing today: what visual culture education – which is the main subject in the Degree Programme in Art Education – includes, and how we relate ourselves to art, and how much we should talk about other visual phenomena in society. As my interest is in the contemporary art, my wish is to root art education more strongly in that, in the discourse and practises of art today.

In this text I will explore and analyse this interest. Even though I am rooted in the context described above, the word “art education” in this text can be understood more broadly. For instance, Irit Rogoff, to whom I will be referring later, uses it in the context of academic institutions and museums. The term Educational Turn in my title is also mostly used in a curatorial context. But as demarcation lines between different actors in the field seem to hover, I am borrowing it here as I think it clarifies my point of view.

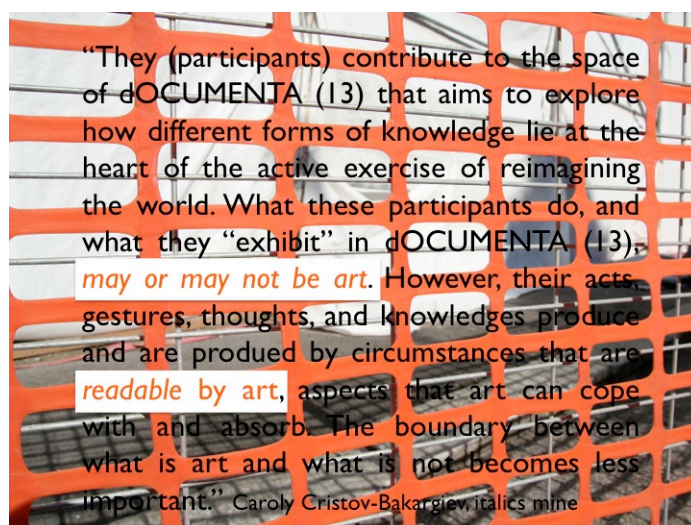
² 30.-31.5.2012, International conference on curating and education in the exhibition context. Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland. Organised by: Finnish Association for Museum Education Pedaali, CuMMA - Curating, Managing and Mediating Art - Aalto University, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, SKY - Finnish Society for Curators

³ 11.-14.4.2013. IHME-nykytaidefestivaali. Organized by Taidesäätiö Pro Arte, Kalevankatu 4, 00100 Helsinki. info@ihmefestival.fi

Participant



Carolyn Christov-Barkargiev, the curator of last year's Documenta in Kassel, invited participants to take part in the exhibition, not artists. Massimiliano Gioni, the director of this year's Biennale in Venice, had unearthed people who had passionately been expressing themselves visually, but never been called artists. Exhibition also included works that are normally called “outsider art”. I see both of these as gestures as reaching out towards a more open and common platform.



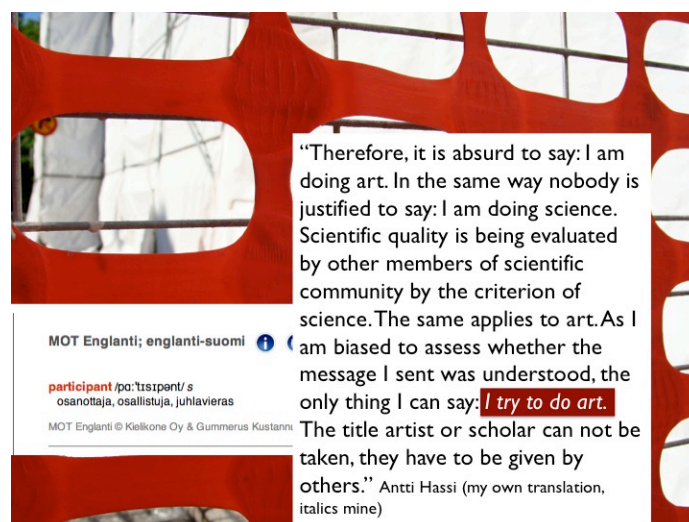
Christov-Bakargiev (2012, 31) writes: “They (participants) contribute to the space of dOCUMENTA (13) that aims to explore how different forms of

knowledge lie at the heart of the active exercise of reimagining the world. What these participants do, and what they “exhibit” in dOCUMENTA (13), *may or may not be art*. However, their acts, gestures, thoughts, and knowledges produce and are produced by circumstances that are *readable* by art, aspects that art can cope with and absorb. The boundary between what is art and what is not becomes less important.” (italics mine)

I was following the discussion in IHME-päivät for two days. The question of whether one or the other project was art arose a few times, but it did not seem to be relevant to the speakers. Even having dealt extensively with contemporary art, I must admit I was confused as well. What happens to art if there is no art to be seen? What do we talk of when we talk of art then?

Maybe things should not be made too complicated, perhaps it is indeed enough that whatever is produced is readable by art, as Christov-Bakargiev writes.

Interestingly, I found a thought relating to this from the history of my own field. Antti Hassi, emeritus professor of art education, wrote: “Therefore, it is absurd to say: I am doing art. In the same way nobody is justified to say: I am doing science. Scientific quality is evaluated by other members of the scientific community, by the criterion of science. The same applies to art. As I am biased to assess whether the message I sent was understood, the only thing I can say is: *I try to do art*. The title artist or scholar can not be taken, they have to be given by others.”⁴ (Hassi 1991, 49)



⁴ Translation is my own.

So, in this regard judging whether or not one's actions are readable by art or not is not a task for the participant – that question will be dealt with by other actors in the field. The most important thing is to *try* to do art, to act, to be a participant.

I also like this idea of the participant because of my own experience: one of the reasons I never really attempted a career as an artist was my wrestling with the modernist legacy: how can anything that I produce, with this visually scarce background, be called art? Art appeared almost godlike. I also had a very religious upbringing, and modernist thinking was perhaps easy to accept because of that. In addition, I could not forget that I was just an art educator, not an artist. I was too critical, too inhibited to act. Perhaps the idea of participation would have freed my mind – who knows.

Art-part

If everybody can participate, if we do not have to think of our actions as art, then what about art? I guess I should try to say at least something about that.

A little more of my own story first. As I said, I had a childhood of restricted visual input⁵, and no background in any form of art. I also did not have a supportive family. My way to art was not predetermined. I obviously had some skill, but I chose an art-oriented high school at random, because I just wanted to escape my secondary school-mates. Yes, art left some traces in me in high school, but I returned to study art education only after having spent some years elsewhere.



⁵ No television, no movies allowed, and apart from a few pictures hanging on the wall at home no connection to art, no visits to museums etc.

As a student of art education, I felt I was like Alice in Wonderland – completely in a strange world. Environmental education, which was strong at that time, has its connections with art⁶. But the approach did not take hold of me. I was drawn to contemporary art. Somehow – and this can only be said afterwards – it seemed to be dealing with the questions of humanity that I was trying to get a handle on. But back then I was not aware of that, and it did not help that no clear articulation of art was at hand. I thought that perhaps everybody else knew what it was, and so I had to find out by myself.

I started searching for the meanings of art in galleries, and contemporary art museums and international exhibitions, as my own relationship with history was somehow complicated. The option to avoid these contemporary questions by withdrawing into history was not at my disposal, as history seemed not to play a role in my life at that time.

I did my final diploma work on this project. So the need to study chiasmas between my own life world and the contemporary art world arose from the need to survive, and of my amazement that I had landed in a world without any recognizable landmarks. My feeling was (and still is) confusion, and I am perhaps naively attempting to understand what cannot be completely understood. And still, a new horizon of possibilities was and is at hand.

I somehow expected to find a “truth” of art – as a consequence of the black and white thinking that was passed on to me from my religious upbringing. I (perhaps unconsciously) thought that once I discovered this truth, I could solve the riddle of contemporary art. And maybe then find a way, even a pattern to follow for myself as well, to become an artist or whatever. But I did not find any truths, only a kaleidoscope of thinking, a world full of colours and opinions, views and attempts to describe and visualize meanings and thinking. All of which became even more complex the more I knew.

⁶ I consider “contemporary art” to be a very wide concept, including a wide variety of art made today – also including environmental art.



If this complexity was the “truth”, what then is, or could be that something that glues things, even loosely, together? I mean the art-part. Instead of going to an institutional definition of art, I go back to Christov-Bargiev. In addition to readability by art, she mentioned the “active exercise of *reimagining* the world”. And Gioni (2013, 18) wrote of the curatorial decisions of Biennale that: “Blurring the line between professional artists and amateurs, outsiders and insiders, the exhibition takes an anthropological approach to the study of images, focusing in particular on the realms of the *imaginary* and the *functions of the imagination*.”

The word imagination appears, and I immediately think of Juho Hollo, a Finnish educationalist, who wrote about imagination and its cultivation almost a hundred years ago. Hollo wrote about the history of the concept of imagination, and different aspects of imagination and fiction, and how education and upbringing are or could be connected to imagination. His thinking seems to be surprisingly relevant, as it seems to be so strongly connected to contemporary discourse.

What, then, to imagine? Here are two possibilities, as artist Tobias Rehberger (2001, 31.1.) says about the role of art: “If one has neatly piled up the world in the front and back rooms, it’s very good to have some help when one takes the piles apart, especially in a way so that one of the bedside rugs suddenly becomes a tiger.”



As artist Erwin Wurm says (2006, 251): “Each of us has an image of reality, and in many ways we share as a species a collective image, an agreed-upon representation of our world. This image, this picture of reality, is disseminated through all sorts of media, education, etc; every aspect of society depends upon its cohesion. But it is important to hold it in one’s mind that this representation, however useful it may be to living one’s life, and thus to the integrity of the society, is not reality itself. It is only a construct. In my work I am always trying to ask questions of this picture. I am trying to engender mistrust in it.”

Educational turn- so what?



From Documenta in Kassel 2007, I remember a huge hall with laminated pictures (yes, really, there were quite a few laminated pictures) fixed onto the wall with

drawing pins.⁷ One of the central themes of the exhibition was education. And I thought that if this is education, I am not interested. It represented a certain formula – Everything is put through a lamination machine, and drawing pins are over there. Please line up here.



Art education in schools is not currently very strong, for several reasons. Is there anything we can do? Irit Rogoff tries to explore the elements she considers important in this so-called “educational turn” in her article “Turning” (2008). As I said earlier, she is writing from a different context, but I find her thoughts also applicable to my context. Rogoff (2008, 8) writes that we should not react to realities, but produce them, and hopes that “education can release our energies from what needs to be opposed to what can be *imagined*”. There comes imagination again, to which I referred earlier.

Rogoff (2008, 6) draws a picture of education as a platform that could bring together different players, so that education “becomes the site of a coming-together of the odd and unexpected – shared curiosities, shared subjectivities, shared sufferings, and shared passions congregate around the promise of a subject, an insight, a creative possibility.”

⁷ There were several pieces from different artists that were hung in the same way. In spite of diversity of art on view this feature was stuck in my mind.



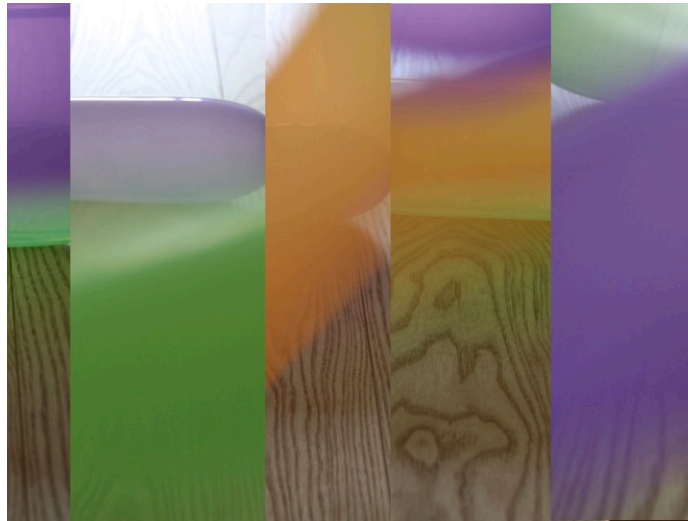
She is drawn to the idea of education “in terms of the places to which we have access”. She understands this access as the ability to formulate one’s own questions, not just simply answering those that come along: an open and participatory democratic process. This is because, as Rogoff writes, the ones who formulate the questions produce the playing field (2008, 8).



This caused me to think about being a participant again – about being a participant, *and* having the power in your own hands. I am interested in power issues, and will also be researching them in my thesis. This is one of the reasons that I am drawn to the ideas I have presented here. Partly because of my own experiences, it has become important to me to have the right to formulate one’s own questions – perhaps very personal ones. I see that this is, or may be, possible within art. Following others and trying to please them did not make my life satisfying, but oppressive. One of the reasons for this behaviour was the use of power, as I have experienced. At first, I had no choice, and after I had choice, I saw no choice. Now, partly because I have been able to pursue this research and

discover all this, I have realized that it is indeed possible to imagine, and to find other ways of thinking and acting, ways that perhaps will better meet with one's own experiences.

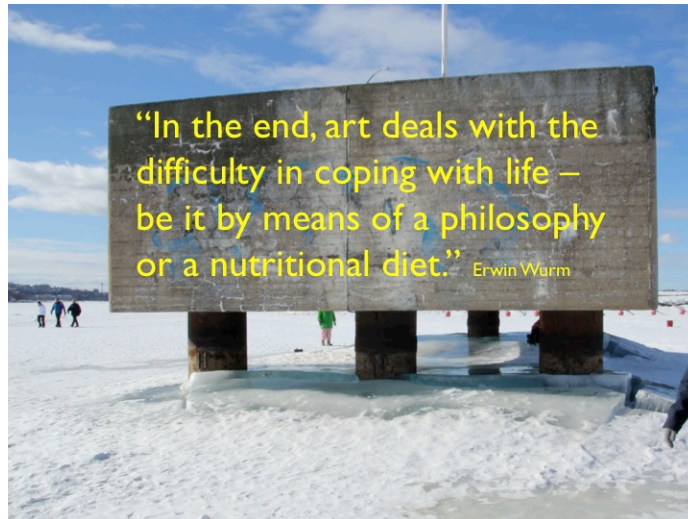
I agree with Rogoff, and think that room, access, and the ability to formulate one's own questions are the essence of art education as well.



Rogoff writes about one's personal relation to truth, and truth not being a position, but a drive: "Increasingly, I think "education" and the "educational turn" might be just that: the moment when we attend to the production and articulation of truths – not truth as correct, as provable, as fact, but truth as that which collects around it subjectivities that are neither gathered nor reflected by other utterances". Rogoff writes that it is easy to state truths in relation to the great arguments and institutions of today, because these dictate the terms of those truths (Rogoff 2008, 9). Here we come to the question of power again.

I wrote earlier that when I started to search for the meaning of contemporary art I thought, somehow naively and also unconsciously, that there is a single truth to be found that would help me to solve the riddle of contemporary art. I did not find truth - I found many truths. But one cannot live in too relative a world. Therefore, it is important to have a platform on which it is possible to formulate one's own questions, that are based on one's own experiences, and so to find one's own personal truth, or a kind of truth as Rogoff writes.

Erwin Wurm (2006, 279) says of art: "In the end, art deals with the difficulty in coping with life – be it by means of a philosophy or a nutritional diet."



I would state that this difficulty in coping with life may, at its best, turn in to a drive to search for this personal truth. And this search may become pleasant when one discovers the possibilities of imagination. If I talk of my own experience, being able to do this research and discover all this have made me realize that it is indeed possible to imagine, and to find other ways of thinking and acting, ways that will perhaps better meet with one's own experiences. At least this has happened with me. And I can say that my drive to research is to find and try to formulate my personal relation with truth, as it becomes visible and meaningful for me here and now. This text is one attempt at this. Even though I am aware that this talk of personal truths in parallel with research may sound naïve and dangerous. But let me do that in the name of *parrhesia*.

I will end with Rogoff's interpretation of Foucault's *parrhesia*, which can be translated as free, blatant, public speech. Rogoff accepts that she may sound romantic or idealistic with the way she presents her thoughts, and that she is doing so at the risk of sounding naïve. Rogoff interprets Foucault's concept as meaning that you have to be frank, and take risks, and so speak out your personal relation to truth. After it is shared in this platform of education with others – who may not share the same truth but who share the need to share, it becomes part of the “educational turn” in the sense Rogoff means (Rogoff 2008, 9).



This is not very far from what Christov-Bakargiev describes as the “exercise of reimagining the world” and participation.

The ideas I have brought up here are not new as such. A turn has taken place in the curatorial context, as described by players in that field I have quoted. And that turn has indeed happened in a way that favours us, art educators. It also seems that there are elements in the history of art education that support this kind of thinking, as was referred to in Hollo and Hassi. I think the ongoing discussion of the focus of our main subject needs to keep going on. With this text, I want to join in this discussion, because I believe that if we, as art educators, contemplate these viewpoints and take them seriously, and perhaps even consider them as a basis and point of departure for our actions, we may have to make a real educational turn.



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