

How to be an artist by night

Raqs Media Collective

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The professional sphere of contemporary art subsists within a larger economy of the production of material and immaterial cultural goods. This includes the media and entertainment industries, publishing, software and design, besides a network of globally active galleries and auction houses that trade in art (traditional, modern & contemporary) and antiquities.. It is not a matter of dispute that a large number of people who train in art academies finally end up as wage workers (on regular or precarious employment) within this burgeoning industry. When art students graduate from their academies, they usually end up as ‘no collar’ workers in the industry by day, and artists, by night, in their dreams.

Contemporary art can also be a refuge from the relentless pressure from culture industry, but it is the kind of refuge that makes no bones about the fact that is also a secret internal exile. The young artist, who often begins professional life as an intern in the corporate setting of the culture industry, usually finds himself or herself in a simultaneous condition of internment within contemporary art.

All industrialization processes brings in their wake an enormous pressure for the ‘new’. The so called creative industry is no exception to this rule. The logic of production itself is often expressed in sloganeering terms as ‘innovate or perish’. A great deal that is valuable in cultural and artistic life becomes

a casualty to this entrepreneurial acceleration. Tenure within this industrial milieu comes at a price. What is lost is the capacity to reflect, to take time, to be critical of the world and one's own practice. The no collar worker by day is at war with the artist by night. The lives of contemporary art practitioners the world over are scarred by this battle.

Sometimes this double life can be traumatic. The fear of irrelevance, obsolescence and marginality haunts many younger practitioners, and the pressure to exhibit as an artist is almost as lethal as the pressure to innovate as a cultural worker or entrepreneur. Coupled with this is the fact that the dissolution of a stable canon in the wake of the rapid global dispersal of contemporary art practice brings a certain disorientation to bear on the lives of most practitioners. No one quite knows what to do next to stay afloat in a very rapidly changing world.

The question of what then constitutes an education that can adequately prepare a practitioner for a vocation in the contemporary arts is primarily a matter of identifying the means to cultivate an attitude of negotiation with and around this kind of pressure. Learning the ropes is learning to do what it takes to maintain a semblance of the life-praxis of artistic autonomy. To think about the content of such an education requires us to return to some very basic questions.

A Sober Interlude at School

Education ordinarily presumes a retreat, or a period of waiting, so as not to burden the student with the distractions and demands of a professionally productive life. The position of apprenticeship that education generally assigns to the student implies a withholding, or deferral of the fulness of practice, which is held out as a promise that can be redeemed once the student proves his or her mastery over the rudiments of a calling. Being someone, and learning to be someone, are seen as two distinct moments, with the first following upon the successful completion of the second. While this may be generally true, it is difficult to sustain this understanding of art education as a 'phase' that merely seeks its posthumous completion in the career of an artist.

Artists undertake to transform themselves continuously through their

practices, and throughout their working lives. For an artist, there can be no rigid separation between being someone and learning to become someone. The reason to continue to be an artist lies in an everyday re-discovery of what remains to be said, or done. Being an artist is no different from learning to become an artist. This process of rediscovery of what it is that he/she needs to do, transforms the artist, on an everyday basis. The horizons of the artist's self continuously expand to take in the incremental unravelling of what the artists still desires to inscribe upon his/her consciousness and the attention of the world.

The day an artist realises that his/her stock of things left to do, say, think about or prepare for has depleted to a point where it measures less than what has been done already, that artist might as well stop practising. This means that in order to continue working, the artist learns to constantly prepare for the unknown, for what remains to be done. An artists education is never finished. School is never out.

What is a school?

Is school a place, an institution, a set of facilities, a situation, a circumstance, an attitude, a constellation of relationships of the transfer of acquired invented and accumulated knowledge, experience and insight from one generation to another ? Perhaps a school, or the idea of a school - as a condition of learning, of being open to discourse and discovery - can also be seen as something we might carry with us wherever we go, whatever we do.

‘Skholē’ (Σχολή) : An Eymological Digression

Whenever we think of a school, it is useful to remind ourselves that the meaning of the word school has undergone many transformations - and the root for the English word school can be found in the classical Greek term ‘Skholē’ (Σχολή), which denotes, firstly ‘ a pursuit or time of leisure’ (taken from a withholding of, or vacation from, other kinds of more instrumentalized time) and only consequently, shades off to mean ‘a forum for discussion’ and ‘a place for learning’ .

It is necessary to dwell upon this conflation of duration (time), gathering (a

forum) and site (place for learning). Of these, time is the most important, because a gathering that does not endure, or a place that disallows the transformative, accumulative inscription of exchange and discourse cannot by themselves, or even in combination generate a context for learning. So it is time, and that too, a particular kind and quality of time - time out, leisurely time, the kind of time that can be a vessel and receptacle for reflection, that is central to learning. The current reality of schools, and of all institutions that produce the commodities known as technique and information, have strayed a great distance from the original sense of what 'schooling' might have meant.

When it comes to the artist's education (which is by definition a continuing process of learning and preparation) - this emphasis on a non-instrumental attitude to time introduces a certain tension between the imperative of having to be productive (in a professional sense, especially within the industry) and a desire to vacate the pressure of production, output and delivery in order to accumulate time to keep on entering situations conducive to learning. It means that while an aspirant has to create the conditions of living that require him or her to seek out and make room for non-instrumental time, time for reflection, contemplation, for investigations that do not necessarily demand results - there are simultaneously a surfeit of obstacles (through constant demands to produce and perform) that hinder this search.

These demands may stem from the industry, from institutional contexts, the market, the need to stay in circulation, and most significantly, the artists ongoing assessments of their own generative capacities. The paradox of an artists life consists in the fact that in order to prepare himself/herself for production, the artist must engage with time in a non-instrumental way, and that this engagement can at all times represent a fundamental distraction from production.

There are two possible ways out of this conundrum. One is to loop preparation and production, leisure and work, in a pattern of successive and alternating phases. The other, perhaps more difficult and rewarding procedure, is to insist on a mode of practice that is also reflective, or on the

kind of reflection that is inseparable from practice. Here, making is thinking, learning is what occurs at the instance of activity. Praxis is theory.

This second mode of intertwined practice/reflection, or praxis, is often difficult to sustain in the face of the current frugality and precariousness of institutional hospitality towards the non-instrumental activities of artists. That is why artists who choose this mode also often end up generating the contexts which make their work possible. For them, the work of art is not just about making art, but also about making the conditions and initiating the networks of solidarity and sociality that enable the making of art. These conditions are not the just material and institutional circumstances that have to do with space, resources and attention to the practical issues that underwrite the realization of artistic projects, (though these are very important and require a great deal of energy). Most crucially, they are also about the diligent and enduring cultivation of the kind of intellectual ambience and social matrix which allows for the unfettering of artistic praxis and inquiry.

Riyaz

In Hindustani (North Indian Classical) Music traditions, riyaz, or the everyday cultivation of one's musicality is ultimately not only a repertoire of exercises to keep the voice or fingers or one's ability to play an instrument in good shape. Riyaz is as much about the cultivation of a set of attitudes and sensibilities as it is about the honing of a skill. It is an attempt to explore the boundaries of what one can do on a regular basis, and of pushing these boundaries, again on a regular basis, so that the foundations of one's practice undergo a daily renewal, so that one keeps becoming an adept. Riyaz is a practitioner's meditation on his or her practice.

What might constitute the riyaz of the kind of artists and practitioners who busy themselves with the continuous generation of contexts for praxis? By way of an attempted response to this question, we would like to offer eight points for consideration, which sketch a rudimentary set of contours for a hypothetical instance of riyaz for the artist and practitioner engaged with praxis in generative contexts, just as the eight notes (CDEFGABC) of a scale provide a scaffolding for the riyaz of a musician. Needless to say,

these 'notes' require and demand elaboration, (chromatic alterations - sharps and flats would be welcome additions) and the drawing up of many other such octaves by interested others. Articulating these notes through practice means filling them out, embodying them with the experiential specificity and particularity contingent on different situations. The notes can be 'sung' in any order, and in any combination, with some repeated, some not, depending on the emphases that a particular situation may call forth. No rules are mandated for their singing, other than that each note be given its due, in a manner that the singer sees fit. No one instance of riyaz can be identical to any other, and riyaz constitutes a form of meditatio, not a 'formula' for practice.

(i) embedded criticality : the awareness that the cultivation of a critical relationship to one's situation is a privilege that has to be earned by an intimacy with it, not purchased by a distance from it. One has to know reality with the intimacy appropriate to a lover in order to appreciate its flaws and be awake to its beauty. This means that the practitioner's stance towards a reality cannot be compromised by an abdication of his or her entanglement with it. When the desire to create a new context for one's practice takes hold, the practitioner reflects on how the founding of that context, and the inauguration of that practice can respond with curiosity and generosity towards what already exists in the practitioner's environment. This is also an acknowledgement of the corollary fact that the desired context cannot be built from materials other than those provided by the existing environment, given that the environment's boundaries are seen to be flexible and open to re-definition through practice itself. While there may be no escape from what exists, entire worlds can also open themselves out, or be prised open, from the co-ordinates of a street corner or a cul-de-sac.

Like the first note on the scale, which anticipates the next octave even as it founds one, embedded criticality acts as a tonic, providing the engaged practitioner with impetus, the slope of a trajectory as well as a destination.

(ii) unintended consequences : the willingness to be open to all the possibilities , including some that are neither anticipated nor intended. The capacity to experience the emergence of new desires of practice when

confronted with new contextual possibilities. The education of intention in order to keep the will apace with changing circumstances. An abeyance of foreclosure, recognition of the occasional unpredictability of the familiar and the patience necessary for surprises go hand in hand. With an openness to unintended consequences, the practitioner remains alert, even to the unimagined.

(iii) radical incompleteness: follows logically from an openness to unintended consequences. Learning to be comfortable with the idea that the circumference of a work is always larger than the boundedness of its nominated authorship. The work of art is never done, and so, there is always room for another author. And then another. Contexts gather people.

(iv) non-(un)equality of practices: working with the idea that generated contexts attract many different kinds of people and their different kind of energy. Not everyone comes with the same history. Class, gender, culture, race, traditions, belief systems, even nutritional histories are always at the practitioner's back, and shape the content of every interaction. The fact that some people have more knowledge/information or appear to have more knowledge/information, or are able to present themselves as having more knowledge/information should not distract from the responsibility of having to live with and address those who do not display the same felicity.

Everyone is communicative and knowledgable, or not, depending on the context they find themselves in. Loquaciousness and reticence go hand in hand, just as knowledge and uncertainty do. Inequal purchases on the understanding of the world are apportioned in roughly equal measures. Some people may know a lot, but everyone is equally ignorant. This is because the sum of the unknown (which is an infinity) greatly outnumbered the sum of the known. All infinities, are for all practical purposes equal, because they are immeasurable. All knowledge is finite, and all ignorance is infinite. So, no matter how much knowledge an instance of practice embodies, it still 'does not know' as much as any other instance of practice. This means that different practices, even when they are not equal to each other in terms of their communicative or cognitive strengths are, at the same time, not unequal either. Learning this modesty is essential for artists or practitioners

who desire a sense of their own strengths.

(v) minor media: the differences between different kinds of practice are chromatic. They are differences of character, not of quantum. There may be major and minor media, but the differences are not analogous to the differences between greater and lesser, or higher and lower, practices. What matters in the end is not scale or impact, but acuity, affect, dispersal, resonance and endurance. This allows different people to enter the field of practice in a manner commensurate to their histories and capacities (which as we have seen above, are neither identical, nor unequal).

Minor media are practices in a minor key. They introduce tonal alterations that re-arrange the regularities made familiar by the repetition of major practices. They alter the mood or setting or emotional tenor of a practice by insisting on attention to irregular variations. They are ways of remembering, imagining and accounting for things that do not get remembered, imagined or accounted for in the ordinary course. At the same time, they are things that can be done everyday. Although riyaz is not the same as the making of a work of art, minor media are the practices that can be stitched into the folds of everyday riyaz - observation, recording, alteration, restoration, arrangement, re-arrangement, ordering, disordering - one step at a time.

Minor media are not masterstrokes, nor do they seek to produce masterpieces, and they are not necessarily worked on by great masters. What they do allow for is a dense layering (either by one person or by many over lengths of time) of the work of art with a multitude of surfaces that produce a context, rhythm and texture of accumulative annotation. It is this accumulation that occasionally yields the sharp significance which is the unique property of a work done in a minor key.

(vi) incrementality: The process of the incremental building of an archive of the results of everyday minor media forms enables a record of the journey of a practice to be generated even as it is in process. A history of the movement of a practice gets inscribed into the very terms of its expression, even as ideas are discussed threadbare, discarded, extended or transformed. This not only allows later entrants to the making of a work (if the work is say, an extended

collaborative process) an opportunity to familiarize themselves with what has been said already, but it also allows a practitioner to re-visit ground they may have already covered before to mine fresh insights from extant thoughts, or to remember something that might have eluded someone's memory. The recording and tracing of the incremental evolution of a work is something that has to be learnt, it does not happen by itself.

(vii) interlocution: the accumulations of the kinds we have described, produced by the actions made possible by riyaz, can take the form of complex assemblages. These complex assemblages demand mediation, and become arenas within which the practitioner acts as an interlocutor in order to fulfil his/her mediatory role. If the work is a boat, the artist-interlocutor is a sailor. An interlocutor is someone who speaks between different acts of speech by translating, annotating, mediating, criticizing, interpreting, and extending the contents of the different instances of articulation. The practitioner, or artist, then is not the owner, or possessor of a work of art, she is someone who takes custody of what might have begun within her life, consciousness and body, but is already on its way out into the world. The artist or practitioner is someone who takes responsibility for the safety and integrity of the work during this voyage, making sure that it lands on some more or less secure promontory of meaning, before embarking on other journeys.

(viii) continuous exchange : neither the history of an idea, nor the 'here and now' of the moment of its iteration occupies a space of privilege. The net effect of the provenances, conversations and the threads that jostle within a work can only give rise to a space of a continuous exchange between memory, reflection, articulation and action in which everyone concerned - practitioner, viewer, critic, curator and enthusiast - contributes to the production and circulation of ideas and knowledge. based on a continuing encounter with the work of art. People learn from and with art, not from instructors or teachers, but from the history of such exchanges and conversations which embody the relationships and interactions that straddle the work of art over time. Clearly, this process of continuous exchange is the transposed articulation in another key or the situation that we found ourselves embedded critically in at the beginning of this 'octave'.

Coda: The Wishing Tree

It is said that on an unmapped island, sheltered in the curve of a hidden bay, there stood a speaking tree. It was one of its kind. Some called it the waq-waq tree, the tree of tongues, some called it the kalpataru, the tree of desires. If you stood under the leaves of the speaking tree and named your desires, the wind rustling in the laves of the tree would echo each utterance, and the wishes that had names would come true.

The world is made as the things in it are named. Sometimes naming presumes knowledge, sometimes the name is a sign that we do not yet know what we name. We trust the name to make do while we hold our knowledge in abeyance. The creation of the world, a sustained and sustaining desire for the world and the knowledge of the world - which is at the same time a tacit admission that we do not know and will never know - all end in the same set of consequences. The world and the things in it get reproduced by naming, knowing, not knowing, desiring. That is what keeps things alive, and the world gets created anew with the expression of each desire. In this sense, an education for art is a school (a time set aside) for the production of desires, a space for the continuous generation of interpretative acts that also successfully constitute the world.

The artist, by night, in dreams, recovers what the no-collar worker lost by day.