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THE IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY

The concept of "the idea of the university" is an abstraction. Its Hegelian/Platonic tone implies a universality of the university; that it is a value in itself and for all time. But the modern university is in fact an historically determined, ideology-producing institution that serves a number of specific political and class interests. The discrepancy between the image of the university as an ideal unity of scientific and humanist knowledge and its actuality as an organization of specialized disciplines serving sectors of the corporate economy is a problematic under much discussion at the moment. But the presentation of the idea of the university as a failed ideal in order to criticise its actuality in practise has a long history.

In an essay titled "The Idea of the University-Learning Processes", the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas builds upon an essay from 1923 of the same title by Karl Jaspers in order likewise to found a criticism of the university based upon a concept of its unachieved ideality. In a totalizing definition which Habermas himself posits as unrealistic, he presents this concept: "What since Humboldt has been called 'the idea of the university' is the project of embodying an ideal life form. Moreover, this idea does not limit itself to one of the many particularized life forms of early bourgeois society, but — thanks to its intimate connection with science and truth — to something universal, something prior to the pluralism of social life forms. The idea of the university points to principals of formation according to which all forms of objective spirit are structured."[1] The implication of such a platonic idealism, to say in effect that "in the beginning was the university", is, by any

1. Jurgen Habermas,"The Idea of the University-Learning Processes", *New German Critique* 41 (Spring-Summer 1987), p. 3.

modern standards of criticism, ridiculous in the extreme.

Yet this ideal and the various rhetorical shadows of it are called upon repeatedly to provide some rationalizing order and *raison d'être* for the expediencies of research and pedagogy in the modern technological state. Habermas views the current promotion of this ideality as a false rhetoric that is called upon to provide the image of a normative autonomy which veils "the flows of information between the now functionally autonomous subsystems (for example, between the universities and the economic-military-administrative complex)" so that they "can be all the more discreetly coordinated."[2] The originary concept of the university thus provides a sense of tradition that offers "only compensatory value... that counts as much as the size of the gaps that it is called upon to fill in a university robbed of its formative idea."[3]

Such a false idealization does not only apply to the situation of the university. It also shares affinity with the originary and totalizing idea of "art". Bourgeois culture embraces art as an historical and trans-cultural immanence of truth, one that links tradition to modernity. This "truth" in fact is imbedded in valorizing particularities ranging from the subjectivities of individual taste to the expediencies of the market. And yet even if we consider the idea of the university or the idea of art as a failed ideal lacking in truth (potentially or actually), does not the possibility of the emptiness of this form seem more acceptable than the absence of form altogether? Whatever the motivations of the critics of such institutions, either to disassemble or to restore the "formative idea", they cannot in the end do without the mirage of the potential existence of truth. This is a painful contradiction for both radical philosophy and radical art. It leads to what has been termed cynicism or "enlightened false-consciousness".[4]

No matter what compromises ideality must make in the face of use-value, without a categorical teleology of "truth" all directed action and purpose decomposes into particularities that exist in a field which is nothing more than the accumulation of those particularities. This is the ultimate entropic implication of the current debate on "the end of history", which is the foreclosure on any possibility of a teleological objective to any social process. The historical process exists despite its "finality", but it is otherwise on automatic pilot, following the natural or unnatural mechanistic drives of forces ungoverned by any

2. *op. cit.*

3. *ibid.*, p. 7.

4. The notion of "enlightened false-consciousness" is introduced by Peter Sloterdijk in his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (University of Minnesota Press: 1987), p. 5.

moral directive. We might reject the desirability of an absolute moral directive, but we cannot accept the possibility of absolutely no moral directive whatever. If this were the case, we would have no stake in the future at all.

Therefore, the concept of "the idea of the university" as well as that of the "idea of art", remains as a field that offers the universalizing values, whether actualized or not, that make it possible to politicize our working relations within it. Irrespective of whatever vulgar forms the university takes in its specific functions, it is also an idea of a value that transcends the actual. And even the failure of this ideal, from the point of view of critical consciousness, is its necessity. If it was absolutely present, the "unity" of this ideal that is desired by conservatives and traditionalists against all the dynamic, albeit disturbing, forces of modernity would be too illusory and oppressive in its disjunction with reality to redeem its "compensatory value". This again, in its realistic, pragmatic and secular concept of history, reflects an attitude, or rather condition, of "enlightened false-consciousness".

II THE CONTEXT OF THE EXHIBITION

It has been part of my working method over the years to ground the subject of my work in a deep relation to the situation of the exhibition itself. This situation can be political or architectural. It can originate from an oblique suggestion occasioned by the people with whom I am working, or some coincidence between my special interests and what is available at the site. My approach to context is only indirectly critical. It is more occasioned by the appropriateness and decorum by which the subject of the work can reveal or establish a relation to the situation that is beyond the arbitrary or the merely expedient. Thus it not only establishes my personal viewpoint from within the subject of the work, but also speaks to the audience that exists in relation to the exhibition context itself.

The occasion of this exhibition and the context of its location in the basement of the main library of the university serves to open up the problematic of the "idea of the university" as subject matter in my artwork, and thus to both reification and criticism. When Scott Watson, who had been recently assigned to the position of curator of the UBC Fine Arts Gallery, invited me to do an exhibition of my own choice, I immediately took the opportunity to center the subject of the work around my experiences of the university as a site of content, as a physical place where ideas happen. The subject of the university and the library had not previously been featured in my work in any specific way, and one of my initial decisions was to relate it to my work as a whole. The Fine Arts Gallery itself played a major part in my own earlier identification with the artist as an intellectual, through exhibitions that I saw and participated in during the 60s and early 70s at the time it was

curated by Alvin Balkind, and later by Kathleen Byrne. The Fine Arts Gallery was a kind of "laboratory" for some radical experiments in a variety of visual arts; for myself the most important being conceptual art and its various interpretations. It is even possible to argue that the disintegration of the concept of the "Idea of the University" as a unity allowed for breaks in the traditional curriculum; and that it is only by virtue of being subsumed within the specialized disciplines that emerged in their natural course to serve a number of socio-economic as well as ideological interests, that such an experimental gallery could appear at all within the context of a university.

At that time and to this day, I have been concerned with the ability of art to function as both aesthetic reification and political critique. My specific agenda had been to open up a space for intellectual practise within the regime of the aesthetic/expressive character of art, specifically visual art. This attitude emerged from my own earlier literary activities in the early 60s, through to my receiving a degree in art history and a position as lecturer in the art history program of the Fine Arts Department of the University of British Columbia during the latter 60s. In my teaching at the time, modernist poetry, Marxism, systems theory, structuralism, art history, modernist art criticism, Marshall McLuhanism, the Russian Avant-garde, minimalist and conceptual art, avant-garde cinema, the student movement, early Marxist feminism and the concerns of everyday life were blended together into a very impure mix of diverse and often incompatable philosophies (one hesitates to grace it with that term). My project was not isolated, and in retrospect it seems perhaps even more coherent than it did at the time. This history was shared by many artists who came out of the academies of the late 60s.

The wavering path that my work has taken since then, also has rotated around a central theme, that of the world as a "text". Through photographic representation and the construction of a syntax of images, what I called a "literature of images", I have tried to draw from the conceptual "microspace" of language a political/expressive embodiment of the reality principle, the logic of the world of the everyday and action. This emphasis on text of course was one of the principle political strategies of the conceptual artists, particularly Art & Language, Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner and Dan Graham, as well as that of political activism, particularly the situationists, insofar as theoretical analysis (and even psuedo-theoretical analysis) could be conceived as opening the world to self-consciousness and criticism by revealing its ideological determinations.

From this distinctly intellectual world-view, text functions as an image of redemption in the world of the everyday. In my work then and still, the book exists as a cipher for a whole range of realities and contingencies. The book can be the library (itself a "university") or the

small paperback that is carried in the pocket, travelling in the world. As such, of course, it is more than a symbolic object. It is the link between the concept and the act; it stimulates the chain of associations that circulate around the world of ideas and everyday life. The book is like an open agenda, a framework from which one spontaneously charts a track towards enlightenment, or at least the hope of it. Chance discovery in the aleatory movement through the library, of the association necessary to the completion of a thought, redeems the obscurity of the everyday. The library is the geography of those associations, and provides the heart of what can be retrieved from the "idea of the university".

The image of study and reading that was suggested naturally by the context of the library had appeared in my earlier works such as *At Work* (1983) and *Image/Text* (1979). The image of the book had appeared in an untitled piece in the "Photo Show" (1969), *The Summer Script* (1973–74, first exhibited in the UBC Fine Arts Gallery) and in *An Attack on Literature* (1975). But further, I was interested for some time in creating an image of discourse (in the Habermasian sense); to create an image of discussion, admittedly as an attempt to reify the ideality of political reason that I have habitually associated with the social role of the intellectual and certain related artistic practises influenced by conceptual art — an oblique and perhaps misguided effort to construct an intellectual life as a form of art-practise. This exhibition not only offered me an opportunity to reflect on my own identification as an intellectual, but also on the relation of the community of intellectuals who comprise the humanities disciplines in the university, to the community of artists who find themselves perhaps unknowingly playing the part of intellectuals in their education as artists in the context of the university.

I was also interested in the geography of the library, both as a place of research and independent learning, the repository of knowledge and cultural memory, and as the superstructure that surrounds the gallery itself, which is in the basement of the main library of the University of British Columbia, the lowest space physically, and seemingly lowest in priority for the administration of the university. I wanted to recognize the modesty of this space, which to me is the saving grace of the whole university, as the place where the university as an unachieved ideal finds its redemption, where knowledge as an abstract ideal can meet with the contingencies of everyday life; that is, in the image of the real relations that people have with intellectual practise.

III ART AND PHILOSOPHY

It is quite possible that my project has failed in relation to these ideal ambitions. That real politics and real history intervene and foreclose on our ambitions is something we

recognize and resist, but it is nevertheless in the attempted realization of our idealizations that the possibility of redemptive knowledge can be even visualized. For me the search for redemptive knowledge is within the terms of the problematic of art, which is not only an ideality but must, in the the formation of the work of art as a concrete object, be constantly negotiated as practical reality. And of course in exploring these relations I am also self-consciously attempting to reify the intellectual practise of the artist as pursuing a special form of knowledge, as a special kind of research practise in the framework of the university as an institution — one that is rarely recognized. As such, the tone of this work is largely polemical. And this has much to do with the particular relations to knowledge that flow from the activity of the artist.

Artistic knowledge is not just something that is given or predetermined; to be researched, retrieved and explained, although that might be a part of it. Artistic meaning is something that is produced, experimentally produced, and thus concretely formed in the process of this production. In the heat of the creative act something new is formed — a synthesis of the existent and the possible that generates a surplus of meaning from the originary material (of sensuous material as well as cultural memory, fantasy and intellectual operations in general) and translates these meanings into cultural property and thus political space in its public, communicative function. Art in this sense shares affinity with experimental science as well as with philosophy. I understand art in fact as philosophy embodied. It is a communicative practise that in its modern sense has partially replaced its auratic ritual aspect with politics, where revealed truth gives place to reasoned discourse. Given the anarchy of modern politics and the tattered condition of enlightenment thought, the possibility of redemptive reason seems to be an illusory ideal. But yet, as an ideal, it nevertheless is the objective of the living discourse of modern philosophy and art; of the practise of the intellectual in the broadest, most general sense. This stands for even the most cynical and despairing of critical philosophy. Jurgen Habermas, in his theory of communicative action and in his analysis of the intersubjective practise of art, has made one of the clearest statements of this outlook: "If aesthetic experience is incorporated into the context of individual life histories, if it is utilized to illuminate a situation and to throw light on individual life-problems — if it at all communicates its impulses to a collective form of life — then art enters into a language game which is no longer that of aesthetic criticism, but belongs, rather, to everyday communicative practise. It then no longer affects only our evaluative language or only renews the interpretation of needs that colour our perceptions; rather, it reaches into our cognitive interpretations and normative expectations and transforms the totality in which these moments are related to each other. In this respect, modern art harbours a utopia that

becomes a reality to the degree that the mimetic powers sublimated in the work of art find resonance in the mimetic powers of a balanced and undistorted intersubjectivity of everyday life. However this does not require a *liquidation* of an art set off from life in the medium of *appearance*, but rather a *changed constellation* of art and the life-world."[5]

But it is not only the task of the artist to discover and effect this "changed constellation of art and the life-world." It is also the task of the philosopher. For this reason I see not only art as a "philosophy embodied", but also philosophy as a form of "parallel practise" to art. My interest in conceptual art and particularly the work of Joseph Kosuth and Art-Language in the late 60s was precisely for their link between art and philosophic practise. It is no coincidence that contemporary art criticism is often a form of disguised philosophy, and that it bases itself on a range of philosophical concerns such as critical theory, semiotics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis and so on. On the other hand, I have always been curious about the indifference and even hostility that professional philosophers have held in regard to the experimental and theoretical attitudes of modern art and especially avant-garde contemporary art. So far, the few attempts to discuss it from a point of informed inquiry have been rare and not very successful. Nevertheless, the practise of philosophy is necessarily an independent activity from art and should never either serve it or attempt to merge with it. Theodor Adorno discussed the link between philosophy and art in the following terms: "Common to art and philosophy is not the form, not the forming process, but a mode of conduct that forbids pseudomorphosis. Both keep faith with their own substance through their opposites: art by making itself resistant to its meanings; philosophy, by refusing to clutch at any immediate thing."[6] They both have a common conceptual content grounded in a language of action.

I thus felt it appropriate to include for the occasion of this catalogue a writer who is grounded in pure activist philosophy and who is rightfully suspicious of the legitimacy of much contemporary art. I asked Paul Piccone, who has been the editor of *Telos* magazine for the past twenty years, to contribute to the catalogue a text of his own choice as a form of "parallel practise" — not to discuss my work; either to explain, criticise or legitimate it, as is the usual function of the catalogue essay, but rather to enter the discourse of the specific subject that is the thematic occasion of this piece as a whole — the context of the university. This he did, contributing a piece that is part of a debate on the condition of the university

5. Jurgen Habermas, "Questions and Counter-questions", in *Habermas and Modernity* (MIT Press, 1985), ed. Richard Bernstein, p. 202.

6. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (Continuum Publishing, 1973), p. 15.

that has been featured in the fall 1989 issue of *Telos*. His essay will antagonize many: he is a vocal critic of the dominant institutions in America. He certainly feels that the "idea of the university" is a failed one, and he advances very specific opinions on why this is the case. His text, like any artistic text, is not without its problematic aspects. His combatative energy and provocative debates on a number of important issues has made him one of those individuals who have kept the life of the mind awake during the spell of intellectual darkness that we often feel descending upon us.

IV PHOTOGRAPHY AND PAINTING

It certainly is the case that written language can discuss the content of specific subjects in a much more precise way than any visual representation. In fact, the bulk of discourse that is properly termed "philosophic" cannot be adequately imaged at all. This is likely the root of the indifference that philosophy has held towards the problematics of visual art. Conceptual art itself shared this skepticism towards the limitations of pictorial representation, usually rejecting it altogether, as in the work of Ian Wilson.[7] As much as my work came out of a relationship to conceptual art, and I had for a period in the 60s rejected imagery, I nevertheless returned to pictorial representation (specifically photographic) from the following rationale: that through photography I could intersect everyday reality and the "speech of the world" with the formal structures of abstract art, and open up a critical reading of "nature" from the point of view of "culture". By this way of working I was able over the subsequent years to elaborate a purposively dialectical relationship between language and the world from within the domain of the artwork as a whole, including the framework of abstraction which defines the distinction between purposive meaning and the general field of reality or the world. I bring up this question at this point in order to introduce some technical information related to my working method.

The most pervasive technique of pictorial representation today, as well as being the most specifically indexical to the world, is photography. It now fulfills the function of imaging and pictorial representation that had been carried by painting before the modern period. Painting, however, had also come to represent, through its historic auratic function, the ideality of art as an abstract value. Painting is the abstract field or horizon of art; it symbolizes art as an ideality. It transmits not only signification but also essence. The avant-

7. The exhibition immediately previous to mine in the UBC Fine Arts Gallery (Jan 6–Feb 4, 1990), was a work by Ian Wilson, titled *Section 53*, consisting of a book on which every page was printed a single line of the words "Absolute Knowledge."

garde has always had an ambivalent attitude towards the historic and traditional function of this essence, this ideality—alternately refusing and reifying its legitimacy. This has been my own tendency: to both deny and recall the historic authority of painting as an absolute ideality by reducing it to its material dimension, and by intersecting it with representations of worldly subjects produced by the vulgar technology of photography. In other words, I have secularized painting. For me the canvas is the "field of ideality" across which is marked the photographic "speech of the world". This "field of ideality" is also paralleled by the white-walled enclosure of the contemporary gallery itself, which frames the text of art in relation to the exterior everyday world; as well as the white page which receives text in the aesthetics of Mallarmé. All of these elements; of invested, ideological value, as well as technical, material substance, have a bearing on the ultimate signification of any project that distinguishes itself as art. And correspondingly, in the interest of philosophic knowledge, no medium of expression can be privileged on the basis of its historical pedigree alone. Photography performs a necessary function in relation to a system of knowledge that is itself specifically and dynamically historical—the field of "art" in its secular modern aspect.

V EVERYDAY LIFE

But in approaching a thematic subject such as "the idea of the university", the specificity of photographic information also has its limits. How does one represent or objectify the activity of "thought" which is the content of intellectual work in the university? What is the image of the "idea of the university"? The first images that come to mind are the banal pictures of the North American campus that habitually accompany university calendars and publicity material. Some of these correspond to reality; others do not. But whatever the generic image or the actual image may be, the aspect of banality turned out to be the key to my approach. The image did not need to be discovered or invented, it was already there as a generic presence. It only needed to be reinvented in order to get beneath the skin of it in the process of re-enacting its photographic imaging, to play indirectly the role of a social anthropologist, documenting typical activities of people working in the university as well as the spatial environment in which intellectual activity takes place. But this photographic imaging had also to be oblique and indirect. As a work of art this project had to go beyond reportage. I could not rely on mere photographic evidence to guarantee the authenticity of the result. I had to avoid the obvious as well as engage the obvious. The photograph, especially when enlarged, has the capacity to magnify the actuality of the world and its latent (or manifest) content. Brought under the scrutiny of our critical consciousness, the enlarged photograph offers a surplus of the real for interpretation. Insignificant details, unnoticed in

the movement of everyday life, assume a new richness of interest. This amounts to a "triumph of the quotidian".

My photographic style is strongly influenced by cinéma vérité, a camera style adopted by Jean-Luc Godard and his cameraman Raoul Coutard. This approach reflects a philosophy of action, in which the narrative of everyday life is transformed by the dynamics of an active subject. In my work snapshots are quickly, spontaneously taken in moments of heightened alertness and extreme nervousness disguised by a seemingly cool indifference to composition, set-up, etc. Several shots are taken just to "warm-up" the camera during any particular scenario. The people in my pictures were all aware of being photographed, of being performers as it were, but being absorbed in the distraction of reading, thinking, talking, etc., could not fix on the instant of the picture-taking. There is thus a fine passage between the artifice of representation and the authentic activity of the persons in the pictures, that frames, if only by inference, the image of the subject, the image not only of "thought as content", but also "thought as movement". The result is an image of "motility" or "action in the present" that embodies the presence of the person not as a detached subject, but as "being in the present", an active subject.[8] The theme of the "idea of the university" then re-emerges not as a unity of privileged moments, but as a flux, a series of connected but distracted instances that flicker at the margins of the primary image.

This deflationary aspect of the anti-monumental, the anti-dramaturgic, the inessential which is the essence of the everyday, the "quotidian" (defined by Henri Lefevbre as "whatever remains after one has eliminated all specialized activities"), emerged as the appropriate attitude to the subject of the university. To treat academic life as a form of "everyday life", to uncover those moments outside or between institutional drama, those moments when the institutions are not institutions, when professors are not playing the role of pedagogue, and students are simply members of an open intellectual community, has the result of unfocussing the subject to reveal its essence on another, more subliminal level — one that, by "making itself resistant to its meanings", allows a less predictable reading of the pictures than that which would satisfy the "idea of the university".

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8. I am referring here in part to the Hegelian term "motility" as interpreted by Herbert Marcuse in his 1932 dissertation, *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity* (MIT Press, 1987).