



THE FAILED STUDENT AND THE HETEROTOPIAN SCHOOL

>>NOVEMBER 5, 2010

Written by Renée O'Drobinak
Edited by Ana Čavić
Ladies of the Press* © 2010

*"First there are the utopias. Utopias are sites with no real space."
—Michel Foucault, extract from 'Des Espaces Autres, lecture for the Cercle d'études
architecturale, 14 March 1967.*

I clearly missed the first performance.

I creep into "class", trying not to gather too much attention. But with a heavy door and echoing room, this is pretty much impossible—all eyes immediately shoot at me. All three pairs of them. I apologetically bow, pointlessly tip toe to a seat, and slump down. So much for being a co-organiser.

I am immediately prompted to describe our failed TEXT/BOOK project. TEXT/BOOK was a gallery based undertaking that Ana and I initiated as the Ladies of the Press* to experiment with recording and archiving during YES. YES. I KNOW. FREE SCHOOL. I KNOW., a project that happened at Five Years in 2009. We meticulously collected notes from each performer, took

notes ourselves, photographed and archived all collected data in an installation in the space throughout the exhibition. It was a public editorial process with a goal to edit a publication in one format or another. This failed miserably. Ana and I found that we couldn't face the mass amounts of data that loomed over us in giant IKEA bags after the show. But this unwittingly empty act of public editing had its perks: we actively contributed ourselves to the discussions and the 'participatory activities', and being the audience when it was lacking. In one sense, we were there to witness, to edit the event itself.

We were hoping to remedy our failure in the next incarnation of this project, in this massive Lecture Hall at Bethnal Green Library. Curiously enough a library is a place of infinite accumulation, and sadly, a public space that is increasingly falling short of having a secure place in the lives of the local inhabitants—though ironically, this is the very reason why we had the opportunity to hold events there in the first place. It's an archive of finite demand, almost. I think this as I pass the romance novella and sport biographies. It was as though we were seeing our editorial project come in full circle, to find itself in yet another failed archive. We intended to take the subjects at LECTURE HALL. FREE SCHOOL. outside of the physical library space and outwards, via publishing, so these materials could be accessed by a bigger audience. What we did succeed in doing was to create even more data.

There was a particularly poignant moment in LECTURE HALL. FREE SCHOOL. after the Geopolyphonies Collective presented their recent research work on markets, when John Cussans made an impassioned argument on the problematics of theory versus practice. What is "field work" without having engaged with the field, and what use is classroom theory in a real London market? A "free" art school, in theory, is perfect. But like all utopias, it's not feasible.

First of all there is the eternal dilemma of ideals VS economy. Most of the sessions were organised by practitioners, lecturers, and the like during their spare time. And needless to say, commitment became an issue. The reality of LECTURE HALL. FREE SCHOOL. was that it was prone to life intervening—and it did. A couple of participants were unable to turn up due to unforeseen circumstances. But then, weekday sessions were most often abysmally attended. Most of the people who wanted to see this were at work. Ana and I were no exception; personal issues popped up for the both of us, to top our manic performing schedule as the Ladies of the Press*, having been on tour in the UK and abroad for most of the year. In the meantime I had effectively lost my job,

and started a new one. But nevertheless I shouldn't have to bow apologetically in regards to this (a girl's got to pay her rent, after all). A free initiative, in order for it to be free, must operate from surplus, whether it is time or money. It's just the way it is.

So much for free school, you say? Perhaps with a lack of funding and PR (Yes, PR. For what is a school with no students? Ignominious wank, as someone once said), it will continue to be a repeated failure—but of course, having to chase funds would defeat the point of it being a "free" school. And even the Ladies of the Press*, with our occasional "publicist" personas, had to tend to our respective secretarial jobs during setup, as my 17:45 appearance in a pinstripe skirt would have testified at the time.

But I still have hope. These free schools, whatever critiques they were intended to be, are not so much utopian but heterotopian, as Foucault had aptly coined it; for our purposes let's apply it to this disjointed Lecture Hall space that witnessed the meeting of a scattered, and perhaps incompatible, selection of creative spheres in London. And I'm not just talking about a bunch of ex-Goldsmiths and ex-Slade students discussing Ontology in an East End library.

During the aforementioned first incarnation of this free school project in 2009 two Italian curators, Marianna Liosi and Alessandra Saviotti, came in and showed us how to cook Carbonara the way they do it back home. Subsequently this simple recipe entered my regular repertoire of everyday cooking. Free school lives on in small constellations, including my frying pan, alongside some bacon and parmesan. Not to mention, I can whip out a basic pole dance move having attended Patricia Delgado's class from the second incarnation, if I am ever confronted with a lonesome pole.

During her session, Nela Milić told the group she is going to recite poetry from three categories: life, love, and places. She chucked, and added that of course 'love' is going to be the most interesting. I suspect we were thinking of all the failed loves when we silently agreed. In terms of my own collective failures, Beckett did famously say, after all, "fail better"—and at the end of the day, I think we did.

■