

Talk Between Classes

By HOMEWORK

(Ditte Lyngkaer Pedersen, Carlos Motta, Lize Mogel, and Jeuno J.E Kim)

The title HOMEWORK suggests various levels of meaning. First, there is the literal usage of the word "homework," a school assignment to be done at "home" in order to practice ones' understanding of the subject learned. Second, the words HOME and WORK, are spaces antithetical to each other. Related to this is the relationship of work done at home, which has often been devalued or illegitimated compared to work done in a public workplace.

HOMEWORK is an artist project based on different processes, where each "homework" is a self-initiated assignment to practice our continuous engagement (collective and individual) with notions of the "political." Contesting the purported neutrality of education, we aim to examine and engage in alternative pedagogical models to understand a larger context, learn to think from within the confronted problem (assignments), and to develop creative responses.



Homework at work in New York City, Spring 2007

HOMEWORK attempts to construct a knowledge colony whose members serve as both teachers and students, where each participant conducts and applies various research models to understand better the idea of the "political" and what it means to be a politically engaged cultural producer. We choose to use a vocabulary endemic to education to contextualize our focus on process without a pre-determined product. Underlying the project is an indirect call for analyzing institutional settings as necessary prescribed spaces for freedom of thought. We try to explore the potential for these spaces to breed critical thinking and a more radical exchange of knowledge.

The rise of constricting political climates affects all sectors of society, and cultural producers have a specific obligation to address what is being produced, discussed and censored in the arts and in society as a whole. What does the "political" mean then in the context of the visual arts?

As a group HOMEWORK has chosen to focus on pedagogical art practices— works and situations that employ strategies common to educational settings and dialogical exchange. We understand these projects as inherently political because they call for a different relationship between the artwork, the artist and the audience and create

alternative social exchanges from within the art institution. Similarly, these practices often reach outside that institution for their source material and audience.

This belief led us to look at different pedagogical strategies used by artists, to create a program of learning and producing knowledge whose nexus is criticality rather than a subscription to any dogmatic paradigm. We were interested in examining the emergence of alternative educational programs and groups, artists using pedagogical methods in informal ways, as well as artist collectives who create spaces for "educational" exchanges that attempt to apply democratic methods of communication—and put this into practice for ourselves. The resultant projects were a series of texts, events and exhibitions that occurred in June 2007 under the rubric of PS122 Gallery in New York City.

The crux of these projects was determined after collectively reading and discussing some of Paulo Freire's writing on pedagogy. Freire's theories, developed in the 1970s, link education to social change through strategies such as dialogical action, developing transformative consciousness, praxis, and the rejection of the traditional "banking" model of education with the aim to "liberate the oppressed"¹. HOMEWORK used these ideas as a springboard to explore the application of Freire's radical thinking on artistic practices by posing the question: *How do you re-enact Paulo Freire's pedagogy today?*

HOMEWORK's own collective response to this question manifested in three separate but interrelated projects: The program "SUMMER SCHOOL", the exhibition "Everybody is Friends with Paulo Freire" and a special issue of the webzine artwurl.org.

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"SUMMER SCHOOL" was a temporary and free school that offered lectures, workshops and performances over 4 weekends in June 2007 at PS122 Gallery in New York City, a former public high school in the East Village that became the PS122 art complex in the 1970s. Today it is home to a performance space, a dance company, artist studios and a day care center. The Gallery itself began as a collectively-run "alternative" space managed by an artist's union, and offering a venue for underrepresented artists. Many early exhibitions and programs were distinctly political including performances by artists Karen Finley and Tim Miller (who were central figures in the NEA controversy of the 1990s)² as well as exhibitions of political graphics collected by Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D).

For SUMMER SCHOOL we invited artists to create a pedagogical experience—one that was active, and broke away from the typical ways we learn as artists or within art education systems. The ghost of the "classroom," however, influenced our thinking and design of SUMMER SCHOOL. This institutional frame (as well as our own professional and educational training) proved to be a major determining factor in how the project, its classes, and the audience operated. Retrospectively, we realize that this was quite contradictory in nature-- to model a structure so closely on traditional institutional forms while simultaneously wanting to break out of it.

¹Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum Ed., 2007

² ² In 1989 American Senators Al D'Amato and Jesse Helms expressed outrage in the congress that the National Endowment for the Arts would award grants to the works by the above-mentioned artists, along with Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, claiming that their art was obscene. As a result individual artist's grants were compromised.

Ultimately, we wonder if it is even possible to truly challenge the institutional frame while participating in it.



Participants at Lin + Lam's "Homefront" screening.

SUMMER SCHOOL consisted of 17 different "classes," which included Laloko's video "How to Make a Samideana Koktelo," an instructional video in Esperanto on how to prepare a sake martini that was synchronized with a live bartender and simultaneous translation. The combination of scripted and unscripted ways of communication produced an unexpected relationship between the subject learned (Esperanto and the cocktail recipe), the live performers (the bartender and the translator) and the "students" whose participation greatly determined the direction of the class, to the point of collectively singing peace songs in Esperanto under the influence of martinis.

Lin + Lam's screening program "Homefront," was a critical presentation of historic films depicting mobile filmmaking employed by government propagandists as well as artists who made films for and with the "common man." These films engaged with the production of a social consciousness. The discussion centered on institutional ways of transmitting knowledge to transform society and the role of educational strategies (including filmic) in this process. Within the specific context of "SUMMER SCHOOL" this analysis emphasized the oppressive side of politicized education.

Benj Gerdes' workshop "Uneven Development in Super 8," focused on real state development in the immediate neighborhood. The class set out to examine the aggressive gentrification of the East Village using the archaic format of Super 8, investigating the politics of housing in developments such as Stuyvesant Town and in public space. Short films were collaboratively shot, developed and screened in one afternoon. The class drew parallels between the nostalgia for the "old neighborhood" and the almost extinct form of Super 8. This was the only class in the SUMMER SCHOOL program that physically ventured outside of the classroom.



Participants at Benj Gerdes' workshop

Ironically, the gallery's immediate neighbor, the Liberation Day Care Center, was experiencing a gentrification crisis of its own. Established simultaneously with the art complex it was facing eviction and relocation so that the performance space upstairs could expand³. This political conflict, which involved a confrontation between two institutions that claimed a historic basis in the community, was largely ignored by SUMMER SCHOOL. Retrospectively, thinking about our claims of political engagement by proposing an open educational experience in the gallery, our overlooking of the day care situation points to the split between producing the political within art and in every day life. The point here is not to understand our reasons or lack of motivation to engage with our neighbors' conflict but rather to question the consistency between our rhetorical (artistic) project and our immediate civic actions.

However, this formulation of political action coexists with other ways of being political. During "SUMMER SCHOOL," participants learned, communicated and expanded their thinking. These personal instances are cumulative and reveal another kind of politics of the everyday—that of any kind of pedagogical experience.

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*A rock in the road
Doesn't need explanation
Lift it together*

-Larry Rinder's response to the question *How do you re-enact Paulo Freire's pedagogy today?*

The exhibition "Everybody is Friends with Paulo Freire" was associative rather than biographical. Freire's writing is highly influential to artists, especially to those who work in pedagogical or dialogical form. HOMEWORK wanted to see where this

³ The building is owned by the city and has received a grant for renovation administered by PS122 Performance Space. The Day Care has been asked to relocate and given a new space in Manhattan's Lower East Side. The Liberation Day Care Center objects that they have as much right to stay there as the art organizations.

influence lay, and how his work, considered radical in the 1970s, resonates in today's world.



View of "Everybody is Friends with Paulo Freire" show

A part of the exhibition was composed of direct responses to the question *How do you re-enact Paulo Freire's pedagogy today?* that we sent this out via an email to cultural producers and educators as a chain letter, asking them to respond and pass on. We received a small collection of responses in the form of documentation of cultural projects, writings and images. Within these responses, we noticed a tendency towards projects that were collective or self-organized, and showed strong identification with Freire's emancipatory ideas. A general sense of dissatisfaction with established models of pedagogy and institutions led some of these practitioners to create or point to alternatives.

Chris Kasper, for instance, wrote about the Danish Højskole system, an educational model conceived by Grundtvig, whose basic idea was to make education accessible for everybody⁴. Kasper describes his experience as a guest teacher at the Krabbesholm Kunsthøjskole and how the school truly engages democratic practices. Chris notes how this experience radically changed his perception of the relationship between teachers and students.

Jonah Bokaer sent in an architectural rendering of the future Center for Performance Research, an artist-run community center in Brooklyn for "praxis, research and presentation of dance, performance and related forms". Responding to a precarious situation in the New York City dance community, Bokaer created a space where it is economically feasible for dancers to self-organize and create experimental work, for example by offering extremely inexpensive rehearsal studios.

Ydre Nørrebro Kultur Bureau (YNKB) sent a booklet documenting one of their projects. As a cultural center located on the edge of Copenhagen, the bureau produces projects with immigrants and other underrepresented communities that exist outside of the city's dominant cultural scene.

⁴ Grundtvig is the ideological father of the folk high school. For more information please visit: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolaj_Frederik_Severin_Grundtvig and <http://www.krabbesholm.dk>

The second part of the exhibition was a circle of nine video monitors of works by artists that take a relevant approach to pedagogical form, and at the same time, "the political".



View of "Everybody is Friends with Paulo Freire"

Carla Herrera-Prats' *Transactions # 3 (Some Statistics)*, expresses the dominance of the US educational system for Mexico's elite. The video presents statistical data, such as the number of Mexican presidents that have graduated from American universities. This video critically demonstrates the impact of American hegemony in culture, economy and politics throughout Latin America. *Transactions # 3 (Some Statistics)* provided a counterpoint to our investigation on pedagogical models that work against existing power structures.

Similarly, Dmitry Vilensky's *Protest Match* denounces the Russian government's suppression of activists and demonstrators that attended the First Russian Social Forum in St. Petersburg, held during the G8 meeting in 2006. Protestors' activities were confined to the Kirov Stadium, in the outskirts of the city, and potential participants were intimidated and harassed by the police so that attendance was very small. The video documents conversations with activists that narrate their struggle. In the context of "Everybody is Friends with Paulo Freire," *Protest Match* underlines the suppression of emancipatory dialogue as a form of violence, a distinctly anti-Freirian notion.

Lastly, Ditte Lyngkaer Pedersen presented *SOBJECT*, a two-channel video. One monitor shows a game of charades where a woman mimes critical terms from recent Danish debates such as *freedom of speech*, *fundamentalism* and *the Mohammed cartoon crisis*. The other monitor shows an audience who attempts to decipher the phrases. The video is an exercise that illustrates the dynamics between the objective and subjective understanding of these terms. This work suggests a process of unlearning and renaming by making the communication of political concepts into a game that abstracts the word into a series of gestures.

"Everybody is Friends with Paulo Freire" and "SUMMER SCHOOL" were an experiment. We used two culturally understood institutional forms (the school and exhibition) to ask ourselves how we can communicate expansively. How and when do we learn? How and when do we teach? Who is learning and who is teaching? As

this project taught us, setting out to find the political within the pedagogical opens up contradictions as well as more profound avenues for investigation. Education is inherently political. It is contained within all aspects of every day life.

HOMEWORK is a collaboration between artists **Ditte Lyngkaer Pedersen**, **Lize Mogel**, **Carlos Motta**, and **Jeuno J.E Kim**. Conceived as a study group, an editorial team and a curatorial collaborative, **HOMEWORK** investigates relationships between art and “the political”, education and politics, process and product. This project is funded by the Danish Arts Council’s DaNY Arts Grant 2007.

Ditte Lyngkær Pedersen, born 1977 in DK. She lives and works in Århus, DK. Ditte uses various mediums including video, installation and sculpture to explore language and the impact of visual material in the construction of our psychological and historical narratives. She has done a series of works on the phenomenon of synesthesia. In conjunction with this work, she is engaged in a number of long term collaborative projects; rum46 in Århus, The Production Unit (SE/DK/NYC). Ditte holds a MFA from the Malmö Art Academy in Sweden, 2004. Her projects and video works have been shown at various international exhibitions and video festivals. This spring her work has been shown in a solo show at GRAND PROJECTS, New Haven, CT and in a video screening program at the Swiss Institute, NYC.

Lize Mogel is an interdisciplinary artist who works with the interstices between art and cultural geography. She inserts and distributes and cartographic projects into public space, including in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Sun Valley, Idaho. Exhibitions include the Gwangju Biennale (South Korea,) PS122 (NYC), Eyebeam (NYC), and the upcoming “Experimental Geography” (ICI, touring). With Lex Bhagat, she is editor of “An Atlas of Radical Cartography” (Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Press, 2007), and organizer of a concurrent traveling exhibition. Lize has collaborated with groups including the Center for Land Use Interpretation, the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, and the Center for Urban Pedagogy. www.publicgreen.com/projects

Carlos Motta is an artist living and working in New York. His work investigates the effects of political intervention in the formation of individual subjectivities, the writing of history and media representation by foregrounding the manipulation of images, speech and language by the dominant order. Carlos' videos and installations draw from current and historical events, most recently, the history of U.S interventionism in Latin America and its influence on the development of local forms of government and thus in every day life. A graduate from The Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program (2005-06), he holds an MFA from Bard College (2003) and a BFA from The School of Visual Arts (2001), all in New York, USA. His work has been internationally shown. www.carlosmotta.com

Jeuno JE Kim is an artist working with sound, video, language and drawings. She received an MFA in 2003 from University of Illinois at Chicago and MA in theology in 2001 from Harvard Divinity School. Originally trained as a musician, her projects focus on investigating personal and historical narratives, which are composed along the lines of voice and counter-voice. She has also worked collaboratively both on singular (as a participant in the Critical Studies Program at Malmö Konsthögskola) and long-term projects (initiated the Århus Malmö Exchange Programme 2006). Born in South Korea, she has studied and worked in the US. Currently she is based in

Malmö and works as an assistant for the Critical Studies post-graduate program at the Malmö Konsthögskola.<http://toietmoi-juno.blogspot.com>