

A GOOD
GOOD FEELING,
MUCH TOO
GOOD TO HIDE
(STUDENT
AGENCY)

Student Representation
and its Whereabouts

Philip Coyne

The question of student representation within the art school is usually a dormant one. If there is none, then the question often comes too late.

It is a question which has resurfaced within the Sandberg Instituut, revolving around two incidents, which students broadly objected to. The first was the introduction of an associate programme, the University of the Underground, which sought to fund itself primarily with private money with the explicit intention to spread the use of this funding model to other institutions.¹ The second incident occurred after a collective that had been successfully de-platformed, by both the staff and students of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and the Sandberg. This transpired because of views expressed within their videos, which were held to be racist, homophobic and misogynistic. In response, the collective deployed the tactical repertoire of the contemporary far right, making extensive use of the rhetoric surrounding campus culture wars. They reached out to right wing media outlets to stoke outrage over the supposed censorship they were facing, conflating freedom of speech with access to a platform, and doxxing students who were particularly vocal during the initial dispute. The school responded by turning a planned internal meeting between the collective and the Board of Directors, addressing the initial incident, into a public discussion. This gave the collective a bigger platform than was initially refused them. They arrived at the discussion with a number of cameras to gain footage for an upcoming video, which, amongst other things, resulted in the harassment of students who turned up to protest the event.

¹ See Angela M. Bartholomew's article 'Choose the worst evil' in this series, for a comprehensive analysis of the University of the Underground and the implications of its plans.

For the students, both incidents illustrated profound disparities between their own views, those promoted within the courses and the ways in which the institution acted. What's more, the students identified that they had little recourse

to affect change in either instance through the conventional channels they had at their disposal. In response to a set of demands made by the students, the Sandberg put together a plan for moving towards a student/alumni council.²⁻³ A proposal would be drafted by an alumnus and a programme coordinator, at which point it would be reviewed, adapted and implemented.⁴ An outline of the planned proceedings was sent to a number of students for feedback and

² This plan came directly from Jurgen Bey, the director of the Sandberg Instituut.

³ It is perhaps worth stating that, from experience working within the Sandberg Instituut, it does seem that there is a genuine desire to include students within many decision-making processes of the institute. This is commendable and rare, but it doesn't go very far towards ameliorating the problems students face, as the school ultimately has final say over any suggestions made.

⁴ Though it was not made clear who or how this review process would take place.

5 The student union functioned through monthly meetings which could be attended by all students, those leading the meetings were rotated and decisions were made through group consensus. Having graduated from the Sandberg in 2018 myself, I was present during the majority of the discussions being had at the time and took part in many of the student union meetings. Nothing was published externally by the student union.

in response they called a general assembly to discuss the plans, during which a student union was set up.⁵ Though somewhat short lived, the students' attempts to keep their voice outside of the formal structures of the school are illuminating.⁶ To put it simply, the students refused representation, recognising its limits as a formation,

6 The union was only active during the school year of 2017-2018. Plans were made during this time to continue in the new school year but as it currently stands these plans have not been put into action.

and opted instead for a broader understanding of the agencies they possess.

A notion of student agency, which stops at representational bodies, is destined to fall short, precisely because this means relinquishing those agencies outside of the formal bureaucratic structures of the school. This would forfeit a profound agency that the formal structures are put in place precisely to govern. An agency which we might call the 'multitudinal' nature of the student body. It is this collective communicative productivity, which the school needs to be a school. Which, instead of enacting political struggle in a conventional sense, carries out something akin to a reproduction of the school. Or rather a reproduction of the student body and its own education both for and against the school. This agency is, importantly, on the students' grounds.

WHERE IS THE SCHOOL?

At the time of these events, there were a number of institutional bodies, within both the Sandberg and Rietveld, which had student representatives in attendance. Each standing in testimonial to the general ambiguity of the term student representation. Any question about the need for representation quickly dissolves into a question about form. How is the representative body constituted, how democratic, accountable, accessible, transparent are its processes, how quickly does it react, what capacities does it hold and how effective are they? Clearly there is no perfect assemblage of these factors and a plurality of representational bodies would be necessary. Representation is, however, tricky to proliferate; a call for more bodies at different levels with different capabilities, is implicitly a call for more bureaucracy. Which is rarely well received.

Even if an adequately comprehensive network of bodies were instituted, it isn't entirely clear that a concept like student representation would be capable

of making the students' desires and objections felt. After all, it has little to say about the students' capacity to act outside of those administrative structures. It only acts on the school's terms, on their grounds. Representation proffers a misleading image of the institution as a monolith with standardised structures, to which the students need only gain access to affect meaningful change. This assumes that power can be found ubiquitously across the school's processes. That they are all of broad importance, equally necessary and equally in use. This is a naive set of assumptions even within the university, where the experience is usually one of too much institution. While the art school generally operates with more fluidity; processes come in and out of use, channels are constantly set up, diverted and neglected.

The epicentres of power within the art school are not hidden behind closed doors as with the university, but instead hidden in plain sight. In part by their flexibility, but also by the critique of these centres of power generated, in good faith, by the educative spheres of the school. Often these critiques are solicited but rarely do they amount to actual change.⁷

The question of need and form, turns into a question of locality. Where actually is the institution, where is it within itself? One answer that could be given for the Sandberg is that much of the institution is absent. It has an even more skeletal structure than other art schools, with the large majority of the tutors and staff working on freelance basis a day or two a week or less. Within the programmes, power is pooled with certain key figures but its deliverance is dispersed, relying heavily on the students and external lecturers to hash it out. This fluidity could in fact be a boon for the Sandberg; if peer-to-peer and cross-course learning were cultivated, if the institute was adequately staffed, and if there was more accountability for those in positions of power. As it stands, this flexibility creates a profound obstacle for the students. Posing the question, how does one hope to influence an institution when one doesn't even know where it is?

7 This is a formation that plagues most art institutions. Critique is asked for, consumed and mobilised by the institution without necessarily implementing any of it. Though a complex phenomenon, it is to a degree the outcome of claims made about art's autonomy from the social whole. Popularised by Theodore Adorno amongst others, this theory poses that the art's autonomy from the social whole creates the necessary conditions of the art's criticality. Which is to say that art cannot be critical if it does not retain a distance from that which actually happens within society, if it were to enact change itself then it would no longer be critical. By sticking to this notion of autonomy it is possible to mobilise critique as an alibi or as a form of repentance without ever having to deal with the implications of said critique.

THE SCHOOL('S) GROUNDS

The decision that the students took to refuse the form of representation that was offered them is illustrative precisely because it was an attempt to circumnavigate

the ambiguities of the school's processes. Instead of organising on the school's terms, they opted to assemble on their own and retained the broad set of agencies that they have at their disposal.

During a recent talk, when thinking about how we might organise, Fred Moten spoke about his tendency to want to focus on those around him instead of that which he is organising against. "The way you organise and the way you

fight is really not so much about them as it is about

us."⁸ Fleshing out this position earlier in the talk, he

claimed, "my own personal tendency is to never give

the state or capital any credit,

for anything".⁹ For him, ⁹ Ibid., [27:59].

capital is simply a "regula-

tory and reactive" force, which "disciplines and regulates something which was there before it", positioning capital as only regulatory, as a logic which

does not produce anything itself. Instead it narrows

and directs productive processes that existed before.¹⁰

Minutes earlier in the talk, he makes it clear what it is

that precedes the regulation of power and capital. "It

turns out the ones who make

new stuff up are us."¹¹

¹¹ Moten (note 8), [35:25].

Another way to put this, is that the productive forces

of capitalism are solely enacted by people working together. Capitalism itself

simply puts into play a set of regulatory techniques to speed up, control and

capture labour. Instead, what constitutes its productive drive is the relational

exchanges the workers make with each other. This set of assumptions underline

the majority of Moten's work with Stefano Harney, in which they claim for the

social sphere not only a profound generativity, but also the various defences it

needs to stave off the creeping enclosure of contemporary capitalism.

There is a similar teleological obfuscation at work within educational institu-

tions, which poses the intended object of the school, the education of its students,

as the consequences of the formal structures of the institution. Claiming the

capacity to produce education for a regulatory system and not those enacting it,

i.e. the tutors and more importantly the students. To put it one way, this framing

claims that the students don't learn, they get taught. At the same time, it claims,

just as capital does, that there wasn't something 'before' it. Though this is much

clearer within universities than it is within the Sandberg, it is still in effect.¹²

If the formal structures of the school are the regulatory frameworks and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the 'us' is still us, then the 'before' is the relational links between student and tutor, research or peer. It is the general generative labour of education. This is not necessarily to say that the school is parasitic or that we should do without it. Instead, it is to say that there is a profound agency within the student body, one which isn't external or added onto the school. An agency which isn't adjunct to the institution precisely because the students aren't. Rather, it is (and they are) absolutely central to both the production of education and the (re) production of the school itself.

12 This is a metaphysical argument, which is similar to Moten's use of 'before'. Each instantiation of education is an interplay between the students (and tutors) and the regulatory capacities of the school (which could be anything from providing a building and electricity to the implementation of neoliberal reforms). But importantly what needs to happen, so that we can claim that education has been had, is carried out by the students. For education to happen, the students need to do the necessary labour of comprehension. This process is muddled somewhat within art schools, as both the tutors and a number of administrators are also engaged in a kind of creative labour. However, this labour would be included in the 'us'.

This is to return to the question of where the school is with a more adequate answer. The school is always already somewhat with the student body. It is already on their grounds, but importantly only as a body. Both the capacity to demand change and to reproduce the school relies on the collective and not the individual. For the students to fully account for their agency they must understand themselves to be in a constant relational bond with each other. This has been made progressively harder as neoliberal reforms have taken root in our schools.

AN ATOMISTIC SOCIALITY

One of the least discussed outcomes of neoliberalism's incursions into the art school are the palpable effects it has had upon the nature of the learning that happens within. While the privatisation of education, the introduction of (higher) fees and the imposed efficiencies are all topics of supreme importance, it is crucial that we do not lose sight of their effects within the institution. These have overseen a slow move towards a thoroughly unsocial educative environment. Whereby students are encouraged to see themselves as individual recipients of an education, one which is bought and delivered. This increasing consumer logic is leaving the students with less and less say over how the schools are ran, beyond how smoothly their programme is delivered.¹³

13 Often the result of this is that the problems the students identify are understood as simply dwindling access to resources within this or that particular school, and not a systemic problem across institutions. It would not be unfamiliar to many art students to hear complaints about insufficient tutor face time, small studios, facility closures, accompanied by the assertion that "I paid for this studio/workshop/course/etc.". Which would not be untrue, but highlights the level of engagement that students feel that can have.

This can be taken further by asserting, as the political philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato does, that within a neoliberal logic “the individual must think of themselves as a fragment of capital”.¹⁴ The students become speculative investors in themselves as units of capital, they are both investors and invested. As such, what is most important is that the student put them-

selves into play; it is their circulation that is key.¹⁵ This

logic permeates that which is produced within the schools. Traction is promoted over content, the new is privileged over rethinking the old. Hasty criticality drowns out the tentative or generous, while open ended platitudes are lauded over emphatic statements. This is accompanied by a relentless aim for continual improvement that will be profoundly familiar to the majority of art students. Weekends and evenings are worked, podcasts are caught up with over toilet breaks. Time with loved ones requires justification, with relationships often resulting (and ending) in collaborative projects.

¹⁵ The fact that the students have made something happen can often be more important than *what* they have made happen. Perhaps it is interesting to query the origins of these neoliberal influences, whether it comes through education or from the art world more generally, where the necessity of circulation is absolutely integral. In terms of further professional prospects, exhibiting in the right spaces, being at the right openings and having the means to circulate work is much more important than the content of said work. Though it is also worth noting that the art school could act as a bulwark against such tendencies by refusing to pander to them, providing speculative time and space for the students instead.

¹⁴ Maurizio Lazzarato, *Experimental Politics; Work, Welfare and Creativity in the Neoliberal Age*, trans. Arianna Bove, Jeremy Gilbert, Andrew Goffey, Mark Hayward, Jason Read and Alberto Toscano, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017, p. 21.

What comes out of these neoliberal incursions *is* a sociality, but it is one that is deeply atomised and individuated. One that encourages students to learn how to log, monetise and put into play their social interactions. This enacts a profound diminution in the students’ capacity to act as a body by convincing them that they aren’t one.

What is needed to embolden the students’ agency is a different sociality. One that confounds individuation, producing a student body in which it is difficult to discern where one student starts and the other ends. It is precisely our relational in-discernibility that provides a bulwark against the various ways in which neoliberalism hopes to break up the student body. As Denise Ferreira Da Silva has put it, we need a difference without separability.¹⁶ A notion of difference which accounts for each individual as a singularity, but not clearly separable from each other, or the existential whole, because of the myriad of affective and physical bonds and commitments we have for one another.

¹⁶ Denise Ferreira da Silva, ‘On Difference Without Separability’ in: Jochen Volz, Júlia Rebouças and Isabella Rjeille (eds), *Incerteza Viva*, São Paulo: Fundação Bial de São Paulo, 2016, p. 57.

COMPLICITY

It isn't unusual to come by a common sense within student bodies akin to that of a capitalist realism.¹⁷ Students identify the profound duress that programmes function under; they object to the monetisation of degrees, and their imposed efficiencies. They rightly identify that little can be done to change this within the channels set up by the schools. And yet they also understand that there is something within the institution that is worth getting at. It is reasonable and unsurprising that the response is often an active avoidance of complicity, enacted through prefigurative flight or weary disengagement. This is a position which is much easier to hold by the consumer / investor / invested student, whereby a plausible distance can be imagined. Avoidance of complicity is an understandable reaction, but it is also precisely the response desired by neoliberal reform. It is a process of profound individuation and often leaves those incapable of avoiding it out in the cold.

¹⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative*, London: Zero Books, 2009.

¹⁸ Perhaps our own fear of complicity has been exasperated by neoliberalism's fear. It would not be the first tendency of neoliberalism which he had incorporated into our day to day lives.

Neoliberalism also flees from complicity.¹⁸ Its atomised sociality is precisely this, allowing for a networked exchange of ideas and commodities which imply as little responsibility as possible. One which hides from the messy reality of human life. Neoliberalism's obsession with the discrete and countable provides a defence against the multitudinal possibilities of individuals assembling. Producing a student body which consumes but does not act. Furthermore, outsourcing and freelance employment are rife within the art world, as they are within the Sandberg. Guarding the institutions from being culpable in the working conditions, mental health and security of their staff.

Perhaps there is something within the notion of complicity that we need to think through more intently, perhaps we should be getting in it and expanding on it. Not so as to excuse ourselves or revel in a lack of compassion, nor so that we can lament in peace, but in aid of reassembling the school and wrestling the term from its pejorative use. After all, it denotes a complex entanglement incongruous with an atomistic sociality.

While absences might occasionally be the only viable political option, this is not the case with the school. Complicity not only necessitates presence, but it also reveals the relative inseparability that we are always subject to. As we accrue

complicity, so do we build a commitment to each other and an imperative to act when that which joins us is threatened.

THE SCHOOL ('S) GROUNDS II

Harney and Moten offer a way to think about how we might build defences, against the various forms of duress our institutions are under, particularly through the dichotomy they set up between the terms policy and planning.¹⁹ The former would be the general tendency of the institution, particularly under neoliberal reform, and the latter an outline for how the student body might hope to enact and build on their agency.

¹⁹ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, London: Minor Compositions, 2013.

Policy is defined as administration that always acts in the interest of the improvement of its object. Whereas planning is the continual and often recurrent production of the means of social reproduction in non-monetisable forms. Where the means are the means, but the means are also the planners. "And the plan is to invent the means in a common experiment launched from any kitchen, any back porch, any basement, any hall, any park bench, any improvised party, every night. This ongoing experiment with the informal, carried out by and on the means of social reproduction, as the to come of the forms of life, is what we mean by planning."²⁰ Planning is the production of forms of life that resist capture, of forms of education which resist the imposed regulation that neoliberalism has ramped up within our schools.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

What planning carries out is "self-sufficiency at the social level, and it reproduces in its experiment not just what it needs, life, but what it wants, life in difference".²¹ The planning of the students is the production of not just what they need – education – but also what they want: education in difference. The education that gets more detailed and beautiful the further you push it, which gets you further away from graduation, further from individuation. What's more, it creates the means of the reproduction of the school and its social life without reproducing an atomised sociality, because it is difficult to transcribe in its inseparability. This is how a student body becomes and sustains a student body.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

RIOT!

In the opening track on Joe Bataan's *Riot!* there is this refrain running throughout, which goes, "It's a good good feeling, that I feel inside. It's a good good feeling, much too good to hide."²² What is meant by this good feeling is made explicit within the title, *It's a Good Feeling (Riot)*. Written and released in 1968, the song provides a profound image of political agencies entanglement with the social lives of those who enact it.

²² Joe Bataan. *Riot!*. Fania Records, 1968, compact disc.

The song not only casts off the most conservative notions about rioting, it also evades those accounts which say rioting is the understandable response to real world grievances. Grievances which are often much more violent, albeit less visible, than the riot itself. Within the song the riot isn't necessarily reactive in these ways. It isn't simply the consequence of grievance, nor its own cause, nor a cause in itself. It instead inhabits a continuum as both reaction to and production of solidarity, political agency, love, generative relationality, complicity and good feelings. All of which also reproduce each other in turn.

The good feeling isn't even the riot, the riot is the means by which the good feeling isn't hidden. Bataan flattens out the various means by which to not hide the feeling. By not explicitly mentioning the riot within the song he sets up an equivalence between the riot and all of those other social forms which build, enact and don't hide the good feeling. This is not to say that there is no difference between them. Their difference is key. It is to say that they are not separable.

What the riot specifically is, is the generative force at work under capital once it has thrown off its regulatory allegiances. It is Harney and Moten's 'before' feeling too good to hide. Whereas all of those other social forms, possess the same productive generativity except within regulation. The riot and the practices of good feelings are inseparable, just as there is an inseparability between the students' agency, their actuation of education, and the social life of the school.

What comes into view is a means by which the Sandberg students can enact an agency without deferring to the formal structures of the school. This would happen not by striking or protesting, both of which still aren't on the students' ground, but instead by doing. Democratizing the school without necessarily tearing down structures, but instead filling out the space that has been emptied

within it. Organising group crits and film clubs, reading groups, lunches, karaoke nights, support networks, skill sharing, putting on shows, barbecuing on the roof. All of these become spaces to come together to plan, to build complicity in each other's education, and in doing so produce the means of both their educative and social reproduction. At which point student representation should come back into the picture, but only once a broader agency possessed by the student body is fully accounted for and plans are afoot within the Sandberg Instituut. Once the defence of the student's domain is underway, once the plans are being made against neoliberalism's incursions on the student's grounds, then a defence can be mounted against those incursions within the formal administrative structures of the school.

All of this is to say that what we need to do is not all that dissimilar to what we want to do. When we get together to feel good, we also plan; we generate the means by which to defend ourselves and that which we would want to defend. To properly embolden the students, the atomistic sociality that has taken hold of our institutions must be routed out and replaced with a de-individuated sociality. If the Sandberg is serious about this prospect, then it should be looking to provide the infrastructure that facilitates peer-to-peer organisation with as little labour as possible. Not as a means to cut back on the responsibility of the programmes, but to thicken the space around them, connecting them to each other.

Once the students feel the good feeling, they will be harder to break up, and once the good feeling is felt, it'll be much too good to hide.

Philip Coyne is an Amsterdam based artist and writer who uses text, sculpture, video and audio to elaborate on a generative poetics of social life. His work touches on friendship, urban wasteland and its relation to the commons, collective joy and non-Cartesian forms of figurative art. Recent texts and exhibitions include *Soft Landings Editions, Sexyland*, Amsterdam (2019), 'A Paper for a Field in Amsterdam; Figurative Art and Falling in Love, Black Metal and UK Garage' (2018), *Shifting Class*, Amsterdam (2018) and 'Being Sent to Coventry; Friendship and Weird Inquiry' (2018).

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