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Press Releases

Educations Sentimental and Unsentimental: Repositioning the Politics of Art and Education

Suhail Malik

Prelude by Tirdad Zolghadr

The following essay is based on a text originally commissioned for the Taipei Biennial 2010. The original essay addressed forms of higher education for artists; for different reasons, the artist PhD had become an important foil through which the Biennial's participating artists discussed the educational turn in the arts, and the democratic promise it tacitly upholds. The latter is usually linked to the "informal," "experimental," or "open" nature of certain "noninstitutional" initiatives. Some political and sentimental implications are well described below, but what I found particularly pressing in this text was how, in an odd case of friendly fire and collateral damage, it also addressed many issues surrounding curatorial education. On the one hand, the quirky autodidact still reigns supreme as a curatorial ideal type, while on the other, institutionalized training for curators, as mentioned elsewhere on this site, is in a privileged moment of transition, a moment in which the discipline is not yet a discipline, at least not quite. But it's safe to say that curatorial training is slowly becoming accepted as a new tradition within the field, even if that acceptance is marked by a grudging fatalism similar to the acceptance of global warming, or the Republican Party. There is no denying that it's here to stay, let's try to deal with it.

Yet, as the text below clarifies, curatorial education can be a contribution that is not entirely beholden to the usual mechanisms of gatekeeping and inclusion in the art field. To paraphrase Malik, a curatorial education, much like an artist PhD, can potentially "undermine the art system of its sole authority—autonomy, if you prefer—over what constitutes originality or innovation in art."

Educations Sentimental and Unsentimental by Suhail Malik

It's a commonplace that education is a good thing. Certainly, art-pedagogical schemes are quite acceptable in events like biennales, which, despite having an agenda of their own (as will be elaborated further below), welcome and celebrate educational ambitions. Taipei Biennial 2010, for example, was deeply influenced by the so-called educational turn in contemporary art, as manifest in both its art and curating, both of which drew greatly on para-educational initiatives such as [Manifesta 6](#).



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Despite this broad affirmation of education in art, of education *and* art, the very notion that artists can be unapologetically educated *as artists* in institutions that specialize in education is frequently met with derision and scorn. Even the jubilation of the recent educational turn in the arts has been fraught with qualifications, such as:

—Institutional education reproduces only that which is known and conventional, fundamentally conflicting with artists’ “real” education, which consists of “the preparation for pure research of the unknown,” implying that it is “impossible to realize truly innovative ideas within the framework of already established institutions and networks.”

—Accordingly, art students should unlearn their habits and ways of looking and understanding, emphasizing process over product, and informal collective production over the requirements of rigid bureaucratized structures promulgated by institutional education.

—Art education happens through nonhierarchical dialogues between the artists and their peers or putative tutors. It is an education that should be absolutely indifferent to inequalities of knowledge (among other things) that lead to unexpected or speculative areas of enquiry.

—Art schools increasingly fail to provide a “temporary refuge” from the commercial sector.

—If art is taught, “no one knows how,” and in any case it cannot—should not—be reduced to a doctrine.

—Academies just deform and misshape young people; the individual artist is more important than any educational program or doctrine.

—In any case, art is unteachable and unlearnable: it is a quality within artists themselves, and all you can do to enable them to make better art is expose them to other artists, be they more senior or in a peer group.

These well-worn objections come down to a deeply established and basic distinction between schooling and education.



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Schooling is the repetition of a fixed body of knowledge, selected, assessed, passed, or rejected by

given authorities according to whatever more or less fixed criteria they hold, and subjected to the power and control mechanisms of established institutions and their bureaucracies. It is a practice of instrumentalism and discipline.

Education, on the other hand, is a learning process that never ends, fostering growth and development of individual and collective agency that instills greater understanding of experience and the world. Education is transformative and induces change, keeping boundaries open and amenable to growth.

The latter ambitions are, of course, those of today's capitalist liberal democracies in sustaining wealth generation through creativity. But, in different form (though troubling proximity), they are also values and practices sought and affirmed in cultural milieus antagonistic to capitalized systems of production. In this alternative advocacy of education, individual or collective self-determination—autonomy—is the counter-principle to the systems of control by prevalent state-capital power.

The list of complaints about the unhappy realities of art education today can be understood as motivated by two distinct interests that overlap in the case of art schools.

First, if contemporary or critical art is the challenging of conventions and conformities, such art takes place as a kind of education. Contemporary art is the opposite of schooling, and, at its most provocative, even seeks to eradicate schooling.



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Second, not only does education take place outside of schools and institutions but, if it is to be true education rather than schooling, then it *must* happen outside of schools and institutions (or in a kind of protected pocket inside of them).

Thus it is not so much art education that is criticized in the formulations above but art schooling. What is truly valuable about art takes place outside of institutions and schools, not because of some misfortune or particular circumstances but in principle.

Since the mid-2000s, contemporary art has accordingly been preoccupied with questions of education and its formats. These concerns gained prominence in the contemporary art system thanks in large measure to the aborted [Manifesta 6](#) of 2006 in Nicosia, Cyprus, which attempted to turn the biennial into a site of art education. These concerns have become prevalent in Europe (and, to a lesser extent, the United States) also as way of providing a practical and conceptual critique of the Bologna Accords, which standardized the administrative framework of higher education in the region. The undoing of schooling for the sake of education in more general terms, but nonetheless vectored through contemporary art, was the theme of the “Deschooling Society” conference organized by London’s Serpentine Gallery and held in that city’s prestigious Hayward Gallery in April 2010, and many others like it.

Art and Autonomy Qua a Politics of Education

What is striking about these debates is that—unlike previous generations who formulated the issues of art education in the immediate and obvious terms of what kind of art school would best serve whatever it was thought that art should be—the recent artistic interests in education now look for education *beyond* the art school, by literally re-placing the site of art education in noninstitutional settings (reading groups, informally organized discussions, artists’ initiatives, web schools, etc.). Or, more powerfully and visibly (which is also to say more authoritatively), parasitizing other kinds of art institutions as expanded educational initiatives. Publicly funded institutions and the internationally oriented biennial circuit in particular provide willing host sites for such educational endeavors, their ambitions chiming well with their aim (usually set by the public-corporate body funding these large-scale organizations) to provide a public good through “creative” activity, or the affirmation of creativity as public good.



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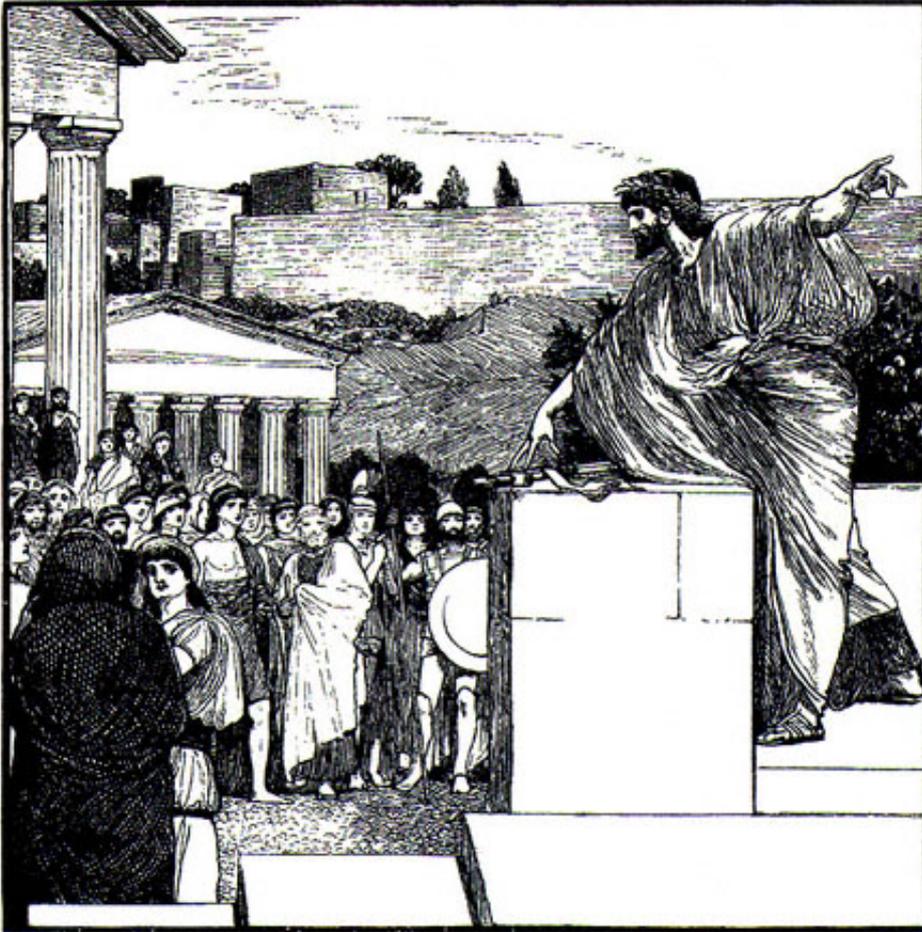
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The political-moral claim of such an art education is more pronounced yet since an education undertaken this way can be for anyone and everyone *because* it is noninstitutional *and* because contemporary art itself is open to everyone: it has no entry barriers or examinations certifying success or failure. Anything can be art, and once that is understood, anyone can be involved in art in any way they like with equal legitimacy. It is not that everyone is an artist, but that art is what you make of it and it is this—your judgment—that begins the conversation. The conversation is where and how art has its effects; in the discussion attached to art and its interest in the transformative, the critical, the challenging, and so on, an education takes place.

This democratizing claim is crucial to this notion of art education: anyone who wishes to take part in deschooled education can do so. The autonomy of the individuals and collectives involved is the same autonomy as that of art, and it is a full democratic autonomy, since it can involve anyone. Unlike schools, art education requires no entrance qualifications stipulated by some fixed institution whose power it is to, first, select those who are permitted to take part, and then judge who succeeds and who fails in this already limited way of doing things. In contrast to schools, art education is an open discussion, whose constituency is anyone who decides to take part in it. As such, the knowledge, empowerment, and emancipation that education abets escape the confines of authority, and—through the equality it enables—make questionable those who are supposed to know. Again, this is a democratic and democratizing education, but what is important here is that it is a democratic *intervention* because it is an alternative to the dead hand of the encrusted and hierarchical institutions and the knowledge and power they establish and reproduce.

The Political Failure of Art Schools

What is of specific interest here is the awkward situation in which art schools find themselves when faced with such an *expanded art-learning*. Given the latter condition, formalized and institutionalized art schooling—with its hierarchies of teachers and students, protocols, regulations, assessments, powers to credit and fail, and so forth—can only look moribund, exclusionary if not elitist, and more interested in management than democratizing imperatives. Considering this, art schools are political failures. Twice so: once because they are formalized institutions with explicit mechanisms of admission and progression, and again because the open-ended and “wild” models of art education that have been advocated since the 1960s (in Europe and North and South America, at least) are being eradicated by the international standardization of education and turned into schooling.



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Two stark options present themselves immediately: The apparently “progressive” one is to accept the terms of art-learning and dissolve art schools, or at least reshape and remobilize them as part of an

expanded network of art-learning that extends beyond formal institutions. The other, apparently “reactionary” option, is to insist that education, properly speaking, is restricted to formalized institutions such as art schools and can only be properly established there, consigning expanded art-learning to something like free play.

Both responses end up affirming the very terms and imperatives of expanded art-learning: the first by its conquest of art education, the second by confirming art schools as a kind of disciplining instrumentality, certainly not in keeping with the what and how of contemporary art, never mind ideas of a more open-ended education, and *not* a way of contributing to a more democratic polity. In any case, with regard to what contemporary art is, if art schools are not quite dead and buried, they have at least one foot in the grave.

Delimiting Expanded Art-Learning

Three basic interlinked tenets of expanded art-learning can be discerned: democracy, anti-institutionalization, and commonality. Taking up these maxims in relation to art education exposes not only the relatively minor matter of the different notions of art education, but also the much more significant one of where and how democracy—if that is indeed the practice of emancipation and equality—is mobilized through education, as it no less makes explicit which democratic practices are in fact held to be important in contemporary art.

Democracy. Expanded art-learning can claim to be democratic for two reasons: it is a self-determined production—autonomous—and, related to that, education is thus for anyone and everyone. But neither of these characteristics means that it is public in any particular instance. Autonomy means precisely that there is no expectation or demand to make such an education available to everyone in any given circumstance. Put otherwise, the self-organization of art-learning is necessarily limited: it is politically self-selecting and, sociologically, is most likely available only to those who are in the know—because they are in certain social networks, or have of an expertise with certain kinds of languages and ideas, or can afford to travel, and so on. These are more than practical considerations: they index that the “anyone” of self-selection and autonomy is distinct from the “anyone” of the public .



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Here are two contesting accounts of what it is to be democratic, one stressing self-determination (tied, in European terms, to liberal democracy), the other stressing public availability and common interest (tied to social democracy). The democracy of common interest requires what can involve a public to be shaped by and for a public (or its representatives). Other terms for this democratic requirement are: accountability and regulation. And this means formalization and institutionalization, “schoolification.”

Example: universities have application procedures whose criteria for entry are public; at times, it is even a (bureaucratic, managerial) requirement that those who are not admitted to these institutions are given reasons explaining that decision. This can form the basis for an appeal, a reapplication, or a decision to apply elsewhere; even the failed applicant has some recourse against the institution.

In contrast, autonomous organizations in principle and in their general (theoretical) formulation, by virtue of their autonomy, have no such obligations. Nonadmission need be offered only with a smile or a frown or some unanswered e-mails or phone calls. No one—precisely, not anyone—has recourse to anything when this happens because autonomous initiatives are open, but, precisely and most important, not public about their selection. A primary feature of autonomy is the lack of public responsibility. The democratizing claims of expanded art education are in this sense *superior* to those required by publicness.

Anti-institutionalization. Part of the political claims of expanded art-learning is that the educational formats set up outside of institutions are sustainable because they change and reorganize collective production according to what needs to be learned or researched. But if such learning is to have a recognizable history and specificity—duration crucial for the political claims made for setting it up—then such learning effectively institutionalizes itself. Sure, it may be an informal institution without all the bureaucracy and paralyzing obligations of public schooling, but if its learning and research are to have any consistency and development, it will form a set of areas of enquiry, establish what is of greater and lesser importance to its learning, decide who is of relevance to its researches and who is not, and perhaps even seek to raise funds to continue further research. However modest the scale such decisions are made on, the particular formations of expanded art education then constitute schools of a kind, the term being understood here in a cultural sense.

Because expanded art-learning rails against the formation of recognized hierarchies and the sedimenting of art-learning into a school in the bureaucratic-institutional sense, these issues cannot be explicitly codified there. Left informal, however, the problems of how, what, and who informs the school can be dealt with only through the informal channels of authority within it. This power remains utterly opaque, uncontestable because it is unformulated. The primary claim here is not hypothetical but actual: that the schools of expanded art-learning are disciplinary institutions anyway, instantiating their discipline—while avowing their ultrademocratic imperatives—not through managerial processes that can protect the least powerful, but *sotto voce* and through the very undemocratic collusion of the most influential, thus proscribing any mechanism to check or even expose such collusion. Autonomy invites endless corruption.

Commonality. Central to expanded art-learning's democratic credentials is the proposal that, like education, contemporary art is for anyone. Contemporary art can be anything and can take place anywhere, especially in its individual or collective deliberation. Coupled with this claim is another: because contemporary art doesn't have disciplinary or schooled criteria, anyone at all can engage in it. No expertise or authority can control art's sense and, in all modesty, in general art can have a universal extension even if, in fact, it does not. This universality or commonality is a key condition for the ability of expanded art-learning to take place anywhere, specifically outside of any system or school.



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In contrast, as bounded institutions that make selections all the way through, from admission to graduation, art schools make apparent that art is not in fact for, or from, anyone and everyone. This limitation of whom art is for is another way in which they are schools. Art schools and curatorial programs make clear that art-making involves training and a discussion among peers who are selected for their appropriateness and ability to partake in it; that only certain artists will be recognized as being able to make a contribution to contemporary art; that the discussion of art is in fact pretty internal to a certain milieu and has a highly limited set of references, interests, and authorities; and that in the realities of the art system, power as it is organized through attention is quite tightly concentrated. As is well known, the usual result is that those who are lucky or unlucky enough to be accepted into art schools are the ones who tend to become established artists (especially in the commercial sector and especially for art schools in or near major metropolitan centers). In short, art schools make perhaps too clear that contemporary art is *not* for anyone or everyone.

The Politico-Artistic Mobilization of the Art School

This last observation about the “in common” captures the key issue here: expanded art-learning pitches itself against the exclusiveness, authority, and cost of schooling in general and art schools in particular, on the basis of art’s common appeal. But is art adequate to this universal expansion of education? Art schools seem to tell us it is not. Whatever confidence exists that art can expand education as an “in common” would then be at best misplaced. If art is *not* for or of anyone at all, is not only a sad misfortune of art schools and their instrumentalization but also a limitation intrinsic to contemporary art, then the possibility of art’s generalizing autonomy is untenable. Art schooling makes clear that, in fact, contemporary art can never (even help) deliver such a democracy. Such a proposal—which is against a prevalent belief in art’s value in the West, ranging from its religious origin to modernism to recent thinking of aesthetics as a complicated “being-in-common”—such a recognition of art’s noncommonality destroys the possibility of art’s generalizing autonomy as it is assumed by an expanded art-learning.

Moreover—and to partially abuse the title of Flaubert’s 1869 novel in which the protagonist remains aware of the affairs of his heart but somewhat bemused by and detached from the uprisings culminating in the French Revolution of 1848—the political-moral authority and the obviousness of an expanded art-learning must then be grasped as being a sentimental education. Sentimental because in its evasion of the terms and conditions imposed on art education by prevailing state-corporate power, expanded art-learning wishes to pursue a politics according to art’s democratic imperative even though, as seen, its democratic credentials and operation are in fact at best tendentious if not specious. However powerful and inspiring it may be, the democratic wish of expanded art-learning is only an affectation that is immediately betrayed by its actualization (which perhaps explains why the collectives formed according to it remain in process and inconstant).



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What is critical here is whether contemporary art, and what it might be, has the greatest political traction on the basis of the principles and aspirations presented by expanded art-learning, or on the basis of the somewhat more limited and self-interested operation of art as exemplified by schools in all their instrumentalism (with regard to the managerial requirements of universities on the one hand, and the art-market-public-institutional-biennial circuit on the other). It is a question of where and how there is a politics of art and in particular of what politics is instantiated by the kinds of education facilitated and presented through publicly funded exhibition venues, biennials and other institutional formats. The deflation of expectations—a political, artistic, and conceptual anti-idealism—does not disqualify all democratic interest for art and education. On the contrary: it enables us to grasp more exactly how and why art(-education) can generate political pressures in the given organization of dominant power. If contemporary art were mainly about and for change, it would be perverse, if not directly contrary to the prevailing notions of contemporary art, to argue that when confronted by academic demands, what is expected in and from art is that it not change.

If this is *not* the argument, then the issue is whether changes in art should come only from within it, due to its autonomy. In that case, a tightly controlling police and regulation would have to exist to certify the “valid” changes in art from the invalid ones. In this instance, art effectively becomes a school in the most regimented sense, irrespective of where and how it otherwise takes place.

A more open view would question not why art changes but how it is to change. What are the better and worse changes art undergoes? But even this makes no sense as a question, because we know that contemporary art can be anything (which no longer means that it can be for anyone), and if this is the condition of art, then the question of how it is to change also invites a policing and regulation, and hands art back to schooling.

Challenging Art

To be able to take up this challenge of art education’s real institutionalization, and what it means for contemporary art in broad terms, it is enough to note that it supposes a certain instrumentalism of art, its “schoolification,” so that it can do something in and to the public site of education. The contentious issue of higher forms of education in the arts, such as curatorial programs and the art PhD, requires contemporary art to deal with the actuality of extant power in education as it is formulated and organized increasingly by the nexus of state, corporations, ideas of public democracy, and the influences of private wealth.



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This is politics—not an idea of politics, nor a wish for it, nor a lamentation of its impossibility, nor the only politics. But it is, minimally, politics. Minimally, because all forms of political and social organization now get their sense from their distance or not, their affiliation or not, to the prevalent state-business nexus—even and especially when providing alternatives to it. MAs and PhDs are awards accredited by institutions that, as we have seen, are criticized greatly for supposedly retooling themselves to the demands of that power nexus. This effort is doubly far from the efforts of deschooling education because first, it remains bound to and affirms award-giving institutions in their regulatory and structural limitations, even as it looks to alter them in terms other than, but convergent with, those of regulation and structural authority (according to the precepts of contemporary art).

The politics of any higher education sector in particular cannot be the politics of an expanded art-learning that seeks to evade capture by institutional forms through an ever fleeting and indeterminate formation of collectives. That maxim can rely only on a sentiment of politics wrought through the accepted common good of a carefree education. Its sentimentality is evident in its repudiation of the awkwardness of the compromises and partialities, badly constituted forms that politics produces in its tarrying with public accountability and performance indicators, and all the managerial procedures that dominate education today (not that these procedures need to be simply accepted either). In such an expanded notion of education, autonomy fuels and validates a sentimentality accompanying the ethical comfort of casting disdain upon the difficulties, compromises, and failures of the institutional arrangements of schools and the manifold regulations they impose. What these self-organized initiatives do not have to contend with is precisely the *political* discomfort of these compromises and entanglements with protocol, the limitations of what is publicly constituted and how it works, and the constraints democracy establishes.

Postlude by Suhail Malik

The line taken in this essay is directed against an assumption that better politics—and something like better art—will happen through the formation of spontaneous communities, of common interests coherently realized, of self-authorized informal educational-artistic endeavors that can nimbly surpass the obvious limitations of the lumbering, sclerotic, or congealed requirements imposed by formal education systems. Tirdad Zolghadr's opening remarks draw attention to the figure of the curator, embodying such a quasi-spontaneous artistic-cultural barometer, who—by the miracle of observing the demands of only his or her own imperative (and securing it through whatever institutional limitations s/he must work within)—somehow manages to get it right, time and again, a positioning that comes to be affirmed by the positive feedback of ever more powerful institutional commissions culminating, perhaps, in the apogee of the Venice Biennale.

It is, for example, imperative that curators demonstrate a *sensitivity* to the art and ideas they select to exhibit or distribute; *respect* the integrity of the artist and whatever s/he imagines the work to be advancing; have ideas *singular* enough to position the art; manifest *insight* into the relevant cultural-artistic conditions of the time; have the *knowledge* borne of familiarity with an art world they esteem and with which they have to be engrossed to ensure that their curatorial decisions and judgments reflect well on the contemporaneity of this or that art, rather than some other; and so on. In short, the curator's "natively," or at least subjectively assumed, understanding, knowledge, and sentiment are paramount. And the social corollary thereof is the curator's charismatic authority. Concentrated precisely on the figure of the curator as discriminator-in-chief, such characteristics are tied to curating's emerging domination in art over the past twenty years or so.

Such a figure affirms the singular insight or the production required of the artwork itself, an autonomy that now operates at the level of exhibition and distribution. The charismatic curator replicates contemporary art's requirement for the singularity of its manifestations as much as its indefiniteness, both of which proscribe rigor with regard to art's systemic presentation. Curating's own "criteria and procedures" then reproduce those of contemporary art production.

If, on the contrary, curating does not come after art but rather shapes it, determines it according to a systemic organization, then the requirements of art's indeterminacy do not hold for the selection of art, and what curating must be as a method must instead be grasped in terms of art's systemic determination. Assuming that art systemically means not to assume the terms of singular vision and personal authority that come with it, art should be taken to be a proposition that can be strengthened and made more demanding, and we should ask more of it, through a rigor and alacrity regarding not only the state of the art but also whatever else it might be.

If, then, curating is not to be just another mechanism for the fame and glorification of art(ists) and/or curators themselves as its "friendly fire"; if art is not to be just about its own celebration (can a less ambitious formulation of contemporary art be conceived?), if art is to have any systemic demand at all, then curating cannot take itself to be a consequence of art production, or to be art's doorman. Rather, curating must assume its power to comprehend art at a systemic level as its own condition. Assuming more of art than the primacy of its production, refuting the deceits propagated by art's assumption of autonomy, curating can organize art's present and future as demand and not just as fact. That is, curating, not art "itself," will take art out of its sclerotic indifference to itself. And if in any sense at all curating precedes the art, takes up art as a systemic and rigorous demand (not least on art itself—never mind whatever else it addresses), then curating deserves its own education. And let it be said outright: contemporary art now needs this.

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