

***Tyler Coburn
& A.L. Steiner***

Jan 11

Steiner,

I hope all is well. I took our dialogue as an opportunity to return to some of your teaching texts, including *After the Fall: Communiqués from Occupied California* and Mary Leclere's *The Question of (e)quality: Art in the Age of Facebook*. There are still more that could have been pulled from your classes. I'm both grateful and embarrassed to admit that you assigned a number of authors I had not previously read, like bell hooks and Deborah Bright, who have done considerable work in developing models of critical pedagogy. Their texts have reverberated well beyond the first readings, and I often find myself retracing old highlights—now as a teacher myself. What I can appreciate, in retrospect, is how such readings brought questions about education into your undergraduate course at USC, as well as your work as MFA faculty. Your decision never seemed designed to dismantle the teacher-student relationship wholesale: you didn't relinquish a student, in the Rancièrian sense, to "learn what he wants, nothing maybe."¹ I do think you might share Joseph Jacotot's view of texts as tools of emancipation (how you define that term is another matter entirely), but rather than follow the ignorant schoolmaster in advocating for individuated education, you facilitated scales of discourse—recirculating readings, for example, through class conversations, smaller study groups, solo responses and exams—that situated each student within multiple, overlapping interpretive communities.

In my own undergraduate education, I shuttled between atomized struggles with texts and classrooms that privileged individuation through rhetorical distinction. Such competitive structures have a way of turning the university into the proving ground for a certain type of capitalist worker. While art education's conventional emphasis on individual creativity can reproduce these structures, its oblique relation to institutional metrics may allow for less determinate use. Maybe this accounts for what happened in your undergraduate classroom, and maybe you're just a good teacher. In any case, my experience as your teaching assistant made me want to know more about your influences and ethic—your history with pedagogy, your program for its future. This is a general place to start, so please take up the threads of your liking.

Best,

Tyler

Jan 1

Hi Tyler,

Thanks for getting this rolling/organized. And thanks for the shout-outs and appreciation. It's been hard without you here. You're inimitable.

I view pedagogy as an intra-dialogical process within a community comprised of people participating in the private and public sector as well as underground/love economies. I can only thank those who (way back during the turn of the 21st century) saw my potential as a communicator. I didn't come into teaching as an education professional, but rather as a photo editor and visual artist who could bring "real-world" experience to School of the Visual Arts.

After receiving an undergraduate degree in Communications (McLuhan, Mander, Bright, hooks, Paik, Meyrowitz, etc.), I spent three years working at an HIV/AIDS-service organization and inserting myself into queer and feminist activist communities. My greatest learning experiences occurred via readings, films, exhibits, lectures, performances, and participation in Queer Nation, Lesbian Avengers and WAC meetings. It was through these networks of people and various mentors that I gained knowledge, got jobs, made friends, and became part of a larger community of cultural producers. As Ann Cvetkovich puts it, "historical residues, collective residues."²

The pedagogical challenge for me is what information, and what forms of consciousness comprise that which we frame as artistic and/or creative work. Work is a difficult term to define, and one that functions as the base of research and activism for W.A.G.E. [Working Artists and the Greater Economy]. We know and have read how the landscape of the worker—in terms of capitalist production and institutional structures—is in flux. And since I recognize my body within this flux, I'm both the model and the praxis within these institutions. What kind of worker am I, who am I working with/for, how are we functioning together within the systems in which we participate, and what translates amongst our bodies? I very much like Karen Barad's theory of "agential realism." In her piece *Posthumanist Performativity*, she states:

“The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither is articulated/articulate in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other. Apparatuses of bodily production and the phenomena they produce are material-discursive in nature.”³

Musings on the student or viewer’s emancipation, distilled through a queer-feminist lens, allow for a questioning of patriarchal power. The proposition of one perspective or another in a school of “Fine Arts” is *always* speculative, and one has to continually grapple with that—the multiplicity of questions and answers that arise in the classroom and the studio are inspiring. To allow for voices to be *equal*, or to recognize access to knowledge as a space of agency, enlightenment, emancipation, community, privilege, liberation, etc., all bring such different possibilities into the institution. I used Gaëlle Krikorian and Amy Kapczynski’s *Access to Knowledge (A2K)* last semester. I’ve been trying to think beyond the classroom (which will soon prove to be somewhat quaint and obsolete!), of bodies together, of the heart vs. the brain vs. the mind.

The speed at which information multiplies makes the specter of teaching feel almost absurd. Your book and thesis project, *I’m That Angel*, allowed me to appreciate this grappling—with sincerity, futility, desire, absurdity and futurity. I feel that you came into the MFA program from a different perspective than most of the students. Now that you’re emancipated (!), can you talk about what perspective you had coming in – what kind of artist you framed yourself as/wanted to be perceived as and how you saw the program as a conduit into teaching and establishing yourself as a pedagogical professional? I see you as someone interested in fictionalizations, critical responses and theor(h)et-orical conversations.

Best,

Steiner

Jan 22

Hi Steiner,

Thanks for this. I really appreciate how you proposed the “pedagogical challenge”: “what information, and what forms of consciousness comprise that which we frame as artistic and/or creative work.” In reading Posthumanist Performativity and parts of *Access to Knowledge* this past week, I found different supports for this position. Barad, for example, argues that “[d]iscourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said. Discursive practices define what count as meaningful statements.” With reference to Foucault, she adds that the “‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ of knowledge practices” are not merely described but produced by discursive practices.

I took a couple of points from this.⁴ First, Barad corrects the conventional assumption that discursive practices are synonymous with linguistic expression and thus are “peculiarly human phenomena.”⁵ “Language has been granted too much power” in general, she argues, having assumed an “agency and historicity” that betrays an anthropocentric premise.⁶ Earlier models of performativity can be faulted, in turn, for upholding this premise; against Judith Butler, Barad argues that “[m]atter is not simply ‘a kind of citationality.’”⁷ Rather, the “mutual entailment” of the material and the discursive, as you’ve quoted, is also the posthuman “entailment” of the human and the non-human—“iterative intra-activity” instead of “iterative citationality.”⁸

You asked about the perspective I had coming into art school; I suppose I’ve mentioned the above by way of response. During the application process, I had two models of learning in mind, one of which involved peers with comparable practices (i.e. research- and writing-intensive). The other closely resembled USC, with a small class size that I presumed would lessen the sharp edges of artistic disciplines—and with a student body deliberately composed of artists with ranging personal and ideological notions of practice. If the first model promised a pointed conversation set within the comfort of mutual recognition, then the latter seemed marked by the necessity and problem of translation, wherein the ethical responsibility to learn to speak on the terms of another can risk producing and maintaining difference. I’m reminded of Gayatri Spivak’s 1992 essay, “Teaching for the Times,” in which she warns against essentializing difference in the academy within a capitalist economy, encouraging the audience “to recognize agency in others, not simply to comprehend otherness.”⁹ Our actual responsibility, it strikes me, is to relate not solely *through* linguistic operations of translation and mediation, but to consider language’s “entailment” *with* matter—to consider our “entailment” *with* one another as also having non-anthropocentric dimensions. Barad thus makes a significant contribution by forgoing “difference” to discuss intelligibility as “a matter of differential articulations and differential responsiveness/engagement.”¹⁰

There’s another aspect to the problem of translation that, during my schooling, actually worked against the hegemony of language. It’s easy to dismiss MFA pedagogy as imparting no more than the requisite theoretical shorthand for circulation on the market (“press-releasespeak”)—easy, in other words, to assume a homology between professionalization and subjectivation. Yet given that I came from a position of already being far too trusting in, and deferential to, the force and naturalness of language, I appreciated that my educational experience actually provided an opportunity to be confounded in the face of art, in the field of art, in the field of peers, alongside peers: differentially *and* discursively *and* materially. The state of being rendered inarticulate—of a work’s co-present non-translatability—can force a *generative* crisis of human agency. This is not to say that I’ve traded deference to one master for another (!), but to suggest art (its necessarily “speculative” sphere, to paraphrase you) as implicating and reminding of the agency of matter...

...That about wraps up the first quarter of the e-mail I had envisaged sending, but I think it's enough from me for the time being. I'll try to address your other points and questions in follow-ups! Also, your e-mail generated some questions. First (quoting loosely), you wrote that the "worker" is "both the model and the praxis" within "capitalist production and institutional structures"—I'm curious to know how you understand "model" here. Then there's "the mind" vs. "the brain," which I'm tempted to map as "knowledge" vs. "information"; it seems you might be implying a social horizon for the former, and I wanted to know more. Also, the classroom: within and beyond art education, what will follow this "quaint and obsolete" form? Lastly, how does pedagogy enter into W.A.G.E.'s research and activism?

Best,

Tyler

Jan 30

Hi Tyler,

So many things to respond to! It feels hard not to be discussing these things in person. Togetherness sometimes feels irreverent, dangerous, threatening.

I find the term "model" useful because of the propensity for the performance of *work*. I believe that when André Gorz wrote, "The 'society of work': It no longer exists and will never return... We have to learn to distinguish the contours of this other society behind the resistances, the dysfunctional behaviour, the dead-ends which make up the present... 'Work' must lose its centrality in the consciousness, thought and imagination of all: We must learn to cast a different gaze upon work; to no longer think of it as something one has or doesn't have, but as what we do. We have to dare to reappropriate work for ourselves," he was describing resistance comprised as a shift translated through the gaze.¹¹ I like how Claire Pentecost & Brian Holmes describe things like this as "sweeter affects."¹² I like the idea of "model" as conduit, structure, and idealized example. Being a worker perpetuates production. It was inspiring discussing different models of resistance, for instance, last year in our summer class with Eric Avila, Jack Halberstam, Robby Herbst, Karen Tongson et. al.. The MFA program itself postures within a mode of visible production, and in my time there since 2011, I've witnessed various forms of resistance, competition, and production within its frameworks, no matter the wide range of individuation and collaboration within the groupings. As we know, schools are organized in service of the industrialized model (ringing bells, separate facilities for each production team, etc.).

W.A.G.E. was birthed from the loins of desire, to simply understand our predicament better, more clearly. Most of us, including myself, hadn't even heard the term "precarity" uttered anywhere—especially in what's known as the art world—in 2008. Our condition as cultural workers was sort of a dirty little secret. Some of us wanted to share, so I'd say that sharing is the central core of W.A.G.E.'s pedagogical practice. We had/have to make people want to talk about their conditions because sharing inevitably leads to some form of consciousness-raising.

In response to the mind=knowledge and brain=information question: yes, I am "implying a social horizon for the former" (I like when you're tempted—what else are you tempted by?). Your analysis implies that the mind is a collective space, which is important. But what is the relation of information or intellect or critical analysis in regards to agency, discursive practices and engagement?

Best,

Steiner

Feb 11

Steiner,

Many thanks for this and forgive my tardy reply. Tonight will be the first of the *I'm that angel* events in the Google Building, so I've been headless, underslept, and overwhelmed by performance anxieties—even when I won't be reading the text myself! There's something in the project that grapples with the mind=knowledge, brain=information equations: the protagonist serves as a content farmer, issuing routinized articles based on language peaking in Google Trends. He traffics in information and reminds (as do the *A2K* contributors) that information is an object, and knowledge is a capacity.

A2K theorist Ahmed Abdel Latif delineates how "[k]nowledge processes information to produce ideas, analysis, and skills," sitting "at the heart of the empowerment of individuals and societies."¹³ Working with a measured ambition that may owe, in part, to the apprehension of speaking of societal empowerment from various points of privilege, *angel*'s protagonist begins with the trends,

does something and then something else to them. If Jasper Johns and Michel de Certeau had a love child...the latter's theory of "*la perruque*"—of the worker's own work being performed under the cover of employed time—is at turns campy, ubiquitous, and irrelevant, for we now rarely experience those delineations so cleanly; and yet atop my project's head it goes.

One of the problems I'm coming to have with *I'm that angel* is that it seems more diagnostic than propositional, and its beleaguered info-worker-patient may be receiving (still) more legitimation than alleviation (alteration?) from the text. His wig is wearing him, modeling him. This is part of the reason why group listening became such an important part of the piece; while the audience members may identify with the protagonist, they can also deconstruct the premise of reliability that the text, as a confessional, purports to possess. Another way of putting this (with reference to Gorz's *Reclaiming Work*) is that they may come to distinguish the "subjectivity" written into the charter of the capitalist subject from those subjectivizing processes necessary for "the development of people's autonomy irrespective of companies' need for it."¹⁴

I think that diagnosis, in this case, can be taken as a methodological choice to remain within the comfort of the known, even when, as my character says (coupling Gilles Deleuze and Max Weber) "a network is also a cage."¹⁵ Tracing your references back to their source texts has helped me recognize that I've allowed the aforementioned apprehension of speaking *on behalf of* to foreclose a horizon of reciprocity that Holmes and Pentecost call "the radical imagination." "Those who proclaim the inexorability of market law do not only refuse to perceive its obvious failings," the authors write, "they also try to cover up the human potential to see what is not there, to express an aspiration."¹⁶

This quote brought to mind one from *Capitalist Realism*, which you mentioned off-handedly in our very first "professional" meeting (and which I raced home to read): "Watching *Children of Men*, we are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it."¹⁷

So what tempts me? Imagination.

There are a few things that stuck in mind over the past two weeks. First, I wanted you to clarify J.K. Gibson-Graham's notion of "systemic knowledge"—the way you unpacked it in your recent *American Realness* interview suggested a different notion of "systemic" than what I would expect.¹⁸ I also was curious to hear more about the dynamics of sharing, as operative in W.A.G.E.'s practice and elsewhere in your life and work. This past week, a *Fillip* presentation on *Intangible Economies* reminded me of the importance of giving a contemporary shape to this activity; By choosing to share nowadays, we cast a different relief on a system that, like the city of Bellona in Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*, can sometimes burn for days without showing any signs of damage.

Best,

Tyler

Feb 16

YES—hope it went well/is going well! I'm there in cister spirit. You are Acéphale's bane, progeny and proselytizer!

Glad you mentioned Dhalgren; I remember seeing Jay Scheib's production of it at The Kitchen.¹⁹ It's still smoldering inside me. Seeing someone's visual interpretation of Delaney (as opposed to thinking Delaney) was mind-blowing, even with its imperfections. I think, considering all the machinations and affects you're ostensibly managing with *I'm that angel*, live performance overall is a generous/generative material for you.

As for systemic, the context I was highlighting is one of holism rather than reductionism. Opacity as the enemy of transparency, knowledge as the salve to obfuscation--->(joyously, a synonym for this is beclouding). As you probably know, I very much like to utilize Hazel Henderson's cake diagram (as inspired by J.K. Gibson-Graham's writings...). We're on the precipice, it is said, of the sharing economy.²⁰ A hard sell in a privatized, profitized world. There are probably some further clues in the terms cooperative and recuperation, which are both still usurped by c(r)apitalism. We're a naive and hopeful species despite our penchant for total destruction. I try to imagine us some other way.

All power to the imagination!
Signing off with a sonic boom,

Steiner

Still an F-word in art school, and might be perceived as a failed or completed movement sharply divided across sex lines, and with no acknowledgement of race, class or sexuality. Still disparaged by (older male) faculty, mourning the good old pre-feminism days, "when female students would still get naked" (actually overheard) or before "feminist" artists intruded to spoil the fun (also overheard). Given such a negative context, not surprising that (female) students might only use it within the sentence, "I'm not a feminist..." especially to preempt dismissal when their work might reflect conscious thinking around gender.

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- ¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 18.
- ² "Cruising the Archive with Ann Cvetkovich," *Recaps Magazine*, 2012, <http://recapsmagazine.com/rethink/cruising-the-archive-with-ann-cvetkovich/>.
- ³ Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 822.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 819.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 818.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 801.
- ⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15, quoted in *Ibid.*, 822.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 828.
- ⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Teaching for the Times," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 7.
- ¹⁰ Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 824.
- ¹¹ André Gorz, *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-based Society* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), 1.
- ¹² Brian Holmes and Claire Pentecost, "The Politics of Perception: Art and the World Economy," *Continental Drift*, section goes here, <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/09/26/the-politics-of-perception/>.
- ¹³ Ahmed Abdel Latif, "The Emergence of the A2K Movement: Reminiscences and Reflections of a Developing-Country Delegate," in *Access to Knowledge in the Age of Intellectual Property*, ed. Amy Kapczynski and Gaëlle Krikorian (New York: Zone Books, 2010), quoted in Amy Kapczynski, "Access to Knowledge: A Conceptual Genealogy," introduction to *Access to Knowledge in the Age of Intellectual Property*, ed. Amy Kapczynski and Gaëlle Krikorian (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 45.
- ¹⁴ André Gorz, *Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-based Society* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), 74.
- ¹⁵ Tyler Coburn, *I'm that angel* (2013), 9.
- ¹⁶ Brian Holmes and Claire Pentecost, "The Politics of Perception: Art and the World Economy," *Continental Drift*, section goes here, <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/09/26/the-politics-of-perception/>.
- ¹⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 2.
- ¹⁸ See "3 Questions on the Economy: Mårten Spångberg & A.L. Steiner on Keith Hennessy," *American Realness*, 2013, 61-66.
- ¹⁹ See "Jay Scheib: Bellona, Destroyer of Cities," *The Kitchen*, 2010, <http://www.thekitchen.org/event/341/0/1/>.
- ²⁰ See Malcolm Harris and Neal Gorenflo, "Share or Die: Voices of the Get Lost Generation in the Age of Crisis," *Shareable*, <http://www.shareable.net/share-or-die>.