

LEARNING FROM LEARNING

Machine Project Workshops as a Laboratory in Context KEN EHRlich

A group of crocheters in the courtyard making cloth birds to inhabit Chris Burden's *Urban Light*. Nearby, a boisterous bunch huddling around tables learning to solder components for a simple hand-held synthesizer. Between BCAM and LACMA West, a flurry of activity as visitors study images of ancient artifacts and produce cardboard and papier-mâché replicas. Families congregate on a second story balcony to learn basic woodworking techniques to create homes for nesting bird species. A cluster of crocheters hunched over tables surrounded by modernist paintings, acquiring techniques to transform strips of plastic bags into a hyperbolic coral reef. Near the entrance to BCAM, groups figuring out how to cut wood, operate small motors and put simple hardware to use in the creation of ambling automatons.

The workshops that took place during the *Machine Project Field Guide to LACMA* event, which are documented in this catalogue, are an extension of Machine Project's ongoing and evolving commitment to offering classes and workshops in a wide range of subjects, from sewing and electronics to computer programming and musical instrument construction. The usual format of advance registration and fee structure that Machine typically employs gave way to more porous and open-ended workshops at LACMA, in which museum visitors could engage a workshop as a participant or a viewer and the number of "students" fluctuated dramatically throughout the day. Museum-goers wandered in and out of the workshops, looking, listening, curious and amused. The unique circumstances of the Machine Project workshops at LACMA might be best understood in relation to existing educational programs in museums. The difference between the standard format of a museum's education department programs and the workshops designed for Machine Project's takeover of the museum is the investment in the cultural value of the objects within the museum. Traditionally, museum education programming, however dialogic or critical, aims to invest the objects held by the museum with cultural value. Machine Project's pedagogical offerings, by contrast, had no such investment. What, then, is their goal? I want to focus here on the educational programming at Machine Project, and the particular instance of the workshops offered at LACMA, within the larger context of alternative education experiments and a recent "pedagogical turn" within contemporary art practice and institutions.

Each workshop offered during the *Machine Project Field Guide to LACMA* was conceived by an individual artist or artist collective. In *Birds for Chris Burden*, Cheryl Cambras transformed her practice of crocheting cloth birds into a do-it-yourself learning session during which museum visitors complimented *Urban Light* with colorful strings of fuzzy companions. In *Synthesizer Workshop with the Machine Project Electron Wranglers*, Clay Chaplin, Pelle Henkle, Lewis Keller, Phillip Stearns, and Henry Solis instructed participants on basic soldering techniques for constructing small handmade synthesizers. Liz Glynn oversaw the transformation of the museum's trash into replicas of the classical sculpture collection in workshop called *Replica, Replica, for W.R.H.*, referencing William Randolph Hearst, who donated much of the museum's classical collection. Ryan Taber presented *Phylogeny and the Multiplex*, which he described as "a hands-on demonstration of avian nesting box building techniques using

materials recovered from the LACMA grounds and your favorite materials from home, culminating in the construction of a sculptural nesting box community space. For birds.” Christine and Margaret Wertheim of the Institute for Figuring led the workshop on how to crochet plastic bags into models of hyperbolic space to be integrated into their ever-evolving Crochet Coral Reef Project, which combines feminine handicraft, higher geometry, and environmental awareness. In his workshop entitled *Foal Army (Budget Cuts)*, Douglas Irving Repetto helped participants transform simple materials into walking wooden creatures. In all of these workshops, the process of participation enabled museum visitors to become more than spectators. The line between artist and audience blurred slightly, and through experiential learning, an unusual shift in the terms of museum spectatorship occurred.

To hear Machine Project founder Mark Allen describe it, the initial impulse to offer classes and workshops in Echo Park came out of a basic experience probably not so uncommon in graduate art programs. Interested in electronics and looking for ways to integrate his art practice with experiments in technology, Mark began to teach himself basic electronics. It was a slow and somewhat grueling process—without the classes he needed, he had to invent the classes he wanted. In the process, he realized that if someone could teach the very fundamental aspects of even a complex subject, one might more quickly begin the process of self-education. In this way, the classes at Machine began both with an eye towards demystifying ever more complex technologies and as a way to share forms of knowledge. The do-it-yourself ethos that surrounds Machine Project workshops is part of a much larger cultural context that seeks a democratization of technology. It’s not surprising, then, that many of the computer-related classes at Machine are based on open-source software. The variety of classes offered at Machine indicates, however, that the inspiration for learning is motivated by a broad interest in the intersections of art, science, and music rather than a specific agenda related to the politics of proprietary software.

Machine Project’s classes and workshops can be related to and situated within the dynamic of Southern California art schools. The evolving social network around Machine Project classes—and Machine Project in general—is in many cases an outgrowth and extension of art school education. In a sense, the informal education program is a parallel to the formalized art education model that has exploded in Southern California in recent years. In response to the growing corporatization, professionalization, and bureaucratization of art education, some critics have condemned the increasing proliferation of MFA art school programs. They argue that, through the MFA programs, students are asked to accept certain educational conventions in the same way they are asked to accept the logic of the market: *there is no alternative*.

But rather than simply critique the existing art school models, a more interesting question might be: How are various models of pedagogy informing artistic practice? Or more generally, what is it that leads artists toward an engagement with pedagogy as part of an artistic practice? In fact, beyond the growing numbers of artists who teach alongside their artistic practice, there are those whose artistic practice in fact consists in a kind of engagement with critical pedagogy. It is precisely *through* an engagement with institutions that pedagogy has become an integral aspect of contemporary artistic practice. Whether formal or informal, the classroom seems to be a space where artists are attempting to embody theory as activity. And besides, who can deny the seduction of the pedagogical mode that resists reification or the impulse to learn from learning?

Over the last several years, Los Angeles has seen the rise of a number of alternative educational experiments. In many ways, Machine Project classes and workshops are at the center of this activity. Importantly, all of these endeavors were initiated by artists and operate either as an extension of artistic practice or alongside an art career. Needless to

say, none of these institutions are accredited, nor do they offer degrees. The Mountain School of Arts, founded in 2005 and operating out of a loft above a Chinatown bar, accepts fifteen students for a three-month term, charges no fees, and encourages engagement with other educational institutions. Sundown Schoolhouse began in 2006 as artist Fritz Haeg shifted gears away from the generative salons he had been hosting at his domestic hilltop dome and towards an educational framework structured on flexibility. Initially housed in Haeg's geodesic dome and eventually taken on the road to a variety of art venues around the country, the Schoolhouse offered seminars, classes, and workshops that ranged from day-long affairs to longer series and included classes in everything from yoga and dance to sustainable food practices and marine ecology. Artist Anton Vidokle has also initiated a series of events based on the model of the seminar and workshop, including the Night School, a temporary school in the form of an artist commission at the New Museum in New York, and United Nations Plaza, a series of seminars organized in Berlin. Vidokle also is an editor of the journal *E-flux*, which has published articles on the "pedagogical turn" in contemporary art and on the notion of research as art. Perhaps most interesting in structure in Los Angeles is the relatively new Public School, a project of Telic Arts Exchange. The Public School creates a curriculum framework simply by inverting the usual process through which course offerings are determined. That is, anyone may propose to teach a class and if enough students are interested in the class, the class is organized. A student may also propose a class they would like to take and the facilitators of the Public School will try to find someone to teach it (the Public School organized reading groups in Richard Serra sculptures at LACMA in the weeks preceding the *Machine Project Field Guide to LACMA*). This model takes the informal structure and the "open to suggestions" model common among these experiments a step further by activating a distribution of the hierarchy of the pedagogical program. Machine Project classes often end up informally organized in a similar way; someone who takes a class may end up proposing another class to teach.

It is within the broader context of these educational experiments that we can think about Machine Project's program of classes and workshops. While there seems to be an obvious connection to the visionary utopianism of pioneering art school predecessors like the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College in terms of refusing the conventional disciplinary boundaries of a typical art education, a more meaningful network of associations might be found through a reconsideration of the liberation pedagogy of the Brazilian activist and author Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire attempted to describe an active, dialogical model of education in which the standardized, stale dynamic between students and teachers—what he called "the banking model of education," which treats students' supposedly "empty" minds like a bank waiting for the deposit of meaningful knowledge from the teacher—is reconsidered through a process of "critical consciousness." Developed in the 1970s in the context of postcolonial discourses and heavily influenced by Frantz Fanon, critical consciousness relied on Marxist class analysis to develop a framework for revolutionary education. To reimagine the student as an active agent rather than a passive recipient in the formation of new structures of knowledge was, for Freire, the first step towards a total transformation the social order.

In an article titled "Cultural Action and Conscientization," describing highly technological, complex societies, Freire states:

In order to function, these societies require specialties, which become specialisms, and rationality, which degenerates into myth-making irrationalism. Distinct from specialties, to which we are not opposed, specialisms narrow the area of knowledge in such a way that the so-called specialists become generally incapable of thinking.¹

It seems obvious that neither Marxism, nor strict class analysis, nor revolutionary rhetoric, nor even radical pedagogy itself hold the sense of potential they did in Freire's heyday. And yet if it is possible to retain a certain amount of idealism regarding the potential for *learning*, then Machine Project's educational endeavors might simply demonstrate by example an argument against "specialisms." Machine Project does not explicitly reach out to the "oppressed." Instead, through workshops it offers highly refined knowledge and specialized skills in a manner that is broadly accessible. In its programming in general, and especially through classes and workshops, Machine spotlights the specialties of members of an extended community of artists, scientists, musicians, programmers, and others in a process of learning that actively discourages the narrowing of knowledge.

The integration of lifelong learning is one of the educational concepts that has motivated and structured workshops at Machine Project. Learning is not seen as something outside of the process of everyday life. The fact that participants of all ages were able to drop in on the workshops throughout the day at LACMA highlights this informal quality. Mark Allen suggests that "there are parallels between models of education and models of spectatorship: just as people learn differently, people see differently." An interest in experiential learning and the search for ways to make esoteric knowledge accessible to as broad a public as possible remain fundamental principles that guide Machine Project. The workshops offered at LACMA taught practical skills in the service of impractical objects. While teaching participants to do and to make, the workshops remained unprogrammable. It is precisely this engagement with curiosity, as opposed to results, that produces a meaningful pedagogical program. With its experimental pedagogy and through the workshops offered at LACMA, Machine Project asks questions through doing: What do we imagine education to be? What needs to be unlearned? Can we educate ourselves to think and do things we can't yet imagine? These are questions that are not easily answered but may simply require further active learning.

1. Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1985) p. 88.