

Whose Web is the Web?: Notes on “The Educational Web”

Kunstverein in Hamburg



Maumaus, *Maumaus as Object*, 2023. Installation view, “The Educational Web,” Kunstverein in Hamburg, April 1–August 6, 2023. Courtesy Maumaus and Kunstverein in Hamburg. Photo: Fred Dott.

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Every art educational context builds a network, creating potential connections and alliances for the future; every collective teaching and learning environment has the potential to inform art discourses and tastes. In the growth of alternative schools and educational programs in art lie progressive promises and potential exclusions, interests, and problematics. These statements arise from the multilayered exhibition of experiments in alternative art education at

the Kunstverein in Hamburg this summer.¹ Under the title "The Educational Web," the exhibition has brought together eight artistic study contexts and thus explores a phenomenon that has become increasingly relevant in the last twenty years: in many places around the world, artist-led schools, educational organizations, and so-called "independent study programs" have emerged that retool artistic and curatorial forms of teaching and learning as alternatives to existing art academies, producing through each iteration new so-called "cohorts" of fellows and graduates.

Each of the eight study programs in "The Educational Web" has developed in very different political and institutional situations and each through its own means. The presented programs are Afterall ArtSchool, AGENCY, BPA// Berlin program for artists, MASS Alexandria, Maumaus, RAW Material Company, Savannah Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA), and Chto Delat School of Emergencies. They are located in London, Berlin, Alexandria, Lisbon, Dakar, Tamale, and in exile, as Chto Delat School of Emergencies can no longer operate in Saint Petersburg. The curatorial approach of the exhibition consists of giving each educational organization the freedom to develop their own presentation. While respecting the differences of their individual forms, their aims, their locations, their struggles, and their contexts, we can say that "The Educational Web" creates a map of alternative art schools. We, the viewers, are invited to learn about eight very different structures and forms of organization and their respective attempts at building frameworks in which artists come together to learn. In this way, the exhibition delivers what it promises: a web, one in which we can understand the eight presented programs as case studies.

From Representation via Relationality to Infrastructure

Let's begin by taking a closer look at the first part of the exhibition, which in its entirety evolves over two floors of the Kunstverein. Our first encounter on the ground floor is with a dense and thoughtfully curated space by the Lisbon-based study program Maumaus: a darkened room with cardboard boxes, half-closed and assembled in a grid, seems, from a distance, almost like a storage space of the Kunstverein. Only upon entering the space does an arranged installation of large and small cardboard boxes become clear to the viewer; however, it remains unclear whether the boxes have been used as packaging material and are now empty or filled with artworks. As packaging material for art, they seem to relate to the medium of the exhibition: showing nothing but themselves, they shift the curatorial framework of "The Educational Web" from a place of representation to a space of reflection in which the process of circulating artworks to produce an exhibition is made visible. But as boxes, their referentiality extends well beyond the walls of the art institution: they seem to refer to the means of production of contemporary logistic capitalism, to its infrastructures and desires, from grossly exploited labor on one end to mediatized unpacking rituals on the other.² Amid these boxes are two intellectually dense works by Renée Green and Manthia Diawara, both teachers at Maumaus, and a table with the catalogue *Parting with the Bonus of Youth*. The table is one of Heimo Zobernig's objects that exhibit their own character as a dispositive, and attached to it by a heavy, oversized silver chain, the catalogue seems anything but inconspicuous or incidental; its subtitle—*Maumaus as Object*—reveals something about the teaching method of the Lisbon program and the curatorial strategy on display in Hamburg. Indeed, the installation of objects reiterates the exhibition the Maumaus catalogue illustrates, which is described as follows:

The objects are ambiguous, their status oscillating between non-art and non-non-art objects, referencing the mechanisms of exhibition displays, the art market, parking problems, audiences, the ceiling height of the Maumaus gallery Lumiar Cité, a Portuguese pastry (half the diameter of a rice cake), furniture systems, beech framing....³

For Maumaus, working with and around objects in their exhibitionary overdeterminacy is a method for teaching and curating that opens up spaces of negotiation "for the terms of art, education, and the exhibition as medium itself."⁴



Maumaus, *Maumaus as Object*, 2023. Installation view, “The Educational Web,” Kunstverein in Hamburg, April 1–August 6, 2023. Courtesy Maumaus and Kunstverein in Hamburg. Photo: Fred Dott.

Inspired by Maumaus’s exhibition, we would like to follow a central reference of “The Educational Web” before climbing the stairs to view the rest of the exhibition: the historically relevant project “A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.,” which had its first iteration in the exact same space at the Kunstverein in Hamburg in 2005.⁵ The project was clearly marked by the post-representational relationality of artistic practices in the early 2000s and was part of what we call today “the educational turn,” the shift from representation via relationality to infrastructure.⁶ With the second iteration of the project at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, Irit Rogoff asked an important question that has marked a shift in museology: what can we learn from the museum beyond what it shows us? This question determines the second shift that “A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.” announced, that is, moving museum studies away from critique to what Rogoff called “an embodied criticality,” and with it in mind, looking critically at museums no longer entails analyzing their representation but understanding them as places of knowledge that can be read against the grain. As Rogoff wrote in 2003:

In “criticality” we have that double occupation in which we are both fully armed with the knowledges of critique, able to analyze and unveil while at the same time sharing and living out the very conditions which we are able to see through. As such we live out a duality that requires at the same time both an analytical mode and a demand to produce new subjectivities that acknowledge that we are what Hannah Arendt has termed “fellow sufferers” of the very conditions we are critically examining.⁷

It is exactly this position that we want to take up today to understand the phenomenon twenty years on from Rogoff’s writing. Today, after the ongoing economization of education, we feel compelled to ask: What promises do we let mobilize us for neoliberal transformation? How are measures of economizing culture and education rendered legitimate? In our time, it seems clear that one knows all too well about the position of “fellow sufferers.” We know that there is no being outside the conditions created by total economization, but despite these conditions, artists continue to create infrastructures for learning together, knowing and reflecting that they themselves are deeply embedded in a neoliberal and neocolonial art world.

“How can we inhabit the spaces of our doubts?”

Let us then follow the “The Educational Web” to the Kunstverein’s upper floor and visit some of the other collective learning spaces, keeping these questions in mind.⁸ To the left of the entrance is a small blue pavilion outfitted with colorful mats and cushions on the floor and an improvised table with a radio. In this reading room, which is open to visitors, RAW Académie presents artistic practices of former fellows, teachers, and artists, as well as the program’s publications and documentations of its collaborations. RAW Académie was instituted in Dakar in 2008 by Koyo

Kouoh and has since remained “dedicated to a dynamic reflection on artistic research, curatorial practice, and critical writing.”⁹ As a center for critical education with an affiliated exhibition space, RAW Académie hosts a residency program that brings together international artists and curators, and one of the walls of the blue room shows the programs of previous editions, which have taken place annually since 2016. Each edition is led by a renowned artistic personality or collective that has taken a distinctive approach to art, curating, or art criticism through their practice, and the next will be coordinated by Princess Marylin Douala Manga Bell in Douala, Cameroon, in fall 2023.¹⁰ Though the RAW Académie editions differ in their orientation, all examine structures of art, knowledge, and culture from a decolonial position, discussing colonial history and its continuities from a critical perspective, and also scrutinize the position of the very institution as part of the conditions of cultural production, new contemporary art transfers, and educational initiatives. In this sense, RAW Académie is not staged as a space of hierarchical knowledge transmission but rather one for encounters in doubt and criticism and for new readings and counternarratives to colonial and neocolonial understandings of art. Looking at the books and videos in the installed library, one can understand the necessity of finding new ways to act in conditions of “fellow suffering”: funding creates and limits possibilities for the recipients but builds knowledge and implements strategies according to logic of the donors.¹¹



Ibrahim Mahama, *Parliament of Ghosts*, 2017–19. Commissioned by Manchester International Festival and the Whitworth, The University of Manchester, and premiered at the Whitworth for MIF19. Installation view, “The Educational Web,” Kunstverein in Hamburg, April 1–August 6, 2023. Courtesy Ibrahim Mahama and Kunstverein in Hamburg. Photo: Fred Dott.

The center of the Kunstverein’s large exhibition space is divided by the Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama’s *Parliament of Ghosts*, which consists of two wooden tribunes facing each other on which seats originally from trains are installed. The train seats refer to British colonial power and its development of Ghana’s infrastructure, and *Parliament of Ghosts* possibly negotiates a journey through history activated by questioning: Who (is) remembered? From what perspective? Where and at what time? While the art object arguably awakens these ghosts in the art market, Ibrahim Mahama’s practice goes beyond representation and reflection: the money generated through art sales initiated the Savannah Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) in Tamale, Ghana.¹² SCCA is a project space that serves as an exhibition and research center with a residency for artists. Mahama understands the space and his practice as “deeply political”:

the way we think about art, the form that comes with is very different from other art schools. The training and teaching received are more as Craftsman who think only about making an object to sell. So, when you think about art as a political tool, it’s very different for them to understand how that can change the form, how can art be this today and be that tomorrow. It is challenging for a lot of people to really understand and go back and forth in between it,

and we try as much as possible to get the community involved in all the things we are doing gradually.¹³

All of this is not visible in the exhibition, and why would it be? Mahama engages here with ghosts, and the infrastructural strategy of playing the art-market game to build an educational context somewhere else remains opaque on the level of representation. Mahama seems not interested in making the relation transparent, and his fellow suffering is not displayed.

The Para-Institution and the Institution

While the schools in “The Educational Web” seek to create (counter)infrastructures, sometimes in difficult political circumstances, they also operate in a highly-economized field of art and engage different markets, not only the art market but also the economies of cities, political economies of soft power in certain regions, and, of course, the market of education itself. They are all but naïve about it. What we can see in the schools at the Kunstverein are structures that find forms and ways of learning and doing art together in these complicated situations and that integrate infrastructural questions into their conceptual frameworks. We encounter a new infrastructural aesthetics—in the sense of building structures and communities as artistic practice—that operates not only in the light of reflection but often in the shadows of representation.

MASS Alexandria, founded by the artist Wael Shawky, exemplifies this tendency. While the program has chosen to remain opaque and seems in the Kunstverein to continue to avoid exhibitionary transparency, works by artists and former participants of the program—Rania Atef, Mohamed Adel Dessouki, Marianne Fahmy, and Mahmoud Tarek—show layers of history and relate in different ways to architectural archives, research, museums, and contemporary image production. We see investigations into historical material and imaginations of possible alternatives so that “the works stand for a development in contemporary Egyptian art for which ‘critique’ and ‘fabulation’ are not opposites.”¹⁴ On the upper floor of the Kunstverein are also the growing library of Afterall ArtSchool, an educational platform affiliated with the research center Afterall at University of the Arts London; the project AGENCY by Ghislaine Leung, who used the exhibition budget for a yearlong program of monthly group meetings at Raven Row in London; and BPA// Berlin program for artists, an artist-led organization founded in 2016 by Angela Bulloch, Simon Denny, and Willem de Rooij. Being located in London and Berlin and connected with established institutions, commercial galleries, and artists, these initiatives seem to differ from the other programs presented in “The Educational Web.” But if we understand the exhibition as a mapping of case studies, their presence might help us to reflect on the phenomenon in a more general sense.



“The Educational Web” symposium, Kunstverein in Hamburg, July 1–2, 2023. Photo: Anja Steidinger.

The pronounced development of alternative art education programs in the globalized art field since the so-called “educational turn” raises numerous questions: Are these programs refuges for progressive art education? Pioneers of its total economization? Both? And what does this development hold for education as a critical practice? As para-

institutions they inhabit the fine line between inside and outside, making programming possible that would not be otherwise. But new institutionalism is clearly also a neoliberal strategy, one well suited for appropriating para-institutional methods. “Neoinstitutionalism” could be just another word for neoliberalism: the building of “new institutions” or “new institutes” has been a common strategy since the 1990s to undermine existing local organizations and structures (with their sedimented histories and networks) as part of the neoliberalization of state economies.¹⁵

What does this mean for “The Educational Web”? The different contexts of the represented schools create possibilities, subvert boundaries, and challenge the classical “apparatus of value coding.”¹⁶ However, they also form themselves in our neoliberal world and perpetuate some of its dynamics. All the projects in “The Educational Web” embody criticality, and in divergent ways, challenge the horizon of what can be said, done, and seen. They create opportunities and possibilities that would not exist without them, but they also reproduce neoliberal habits:

1. They construct networks for the future.
2. They are based on competitive open calls with certain conditions and metrics for qualification.
3. They are funded through grants and donations, participation in the art market, or fees from participants and thus are based on certain economies that relate to what we can call an “economization of education.”

All three points together are, of course, embedded in a neoliberal and a neocolonial world. Funding bodies, like Goethe Institute, for example, might have an interest in building future elite networks in different parts of the world that are based on competitive selection but also trust and, in a certain way, belonging. The networks that are created by fellowship programs and educational contexts (however community-based they might be) can be helpful entry points and infrastructures of trust for neocolonial cultural endeavors.



Chto Delat. Installation view, “The Educational Web,” Kunstverein in Hamburg, April 1–August 6, 2023. Photo: Fred Dott.

The Insistence and Persistence on Study

The different platforms shown in *The Educational Web* are as much parts of a phenomenon that produces networks in a neoliberal and neocolonial world as they are—sometimes more, sometimes less thoroughly or successfully—counterprogramming to the very conditions they create. With this in mind, we would like to consider the contribution of Chto Delat’s school, which now operates in exile as the School of Emergencies.¹⁷ In the last part of the exhibition, an installation of beds by Chto Delat reflects the situation of exile and the insistence and persistence of intellectuality and life, when what remains of one’s own world might be an unfamiliar bed one rests and wakes in. And indeed, the jumbled beds in their original state might indicate that something terrible has happened that deprives one of sleep.

Around the installation we see various videos, which Chto Delat calls *Songspiel*, referring to Bertolt Brecht, that show collective works resulting from Chto Delat’s educative practice. Formerly called the School for Engaged Art, Chto Delat’s project was renamed in response to the Russo-Ukrainian War but remains dedicated to collective artistic practice. The self-reflexive examination and discussion of the form of organization and the situation of their work is an essential part of the collective’s artistic practice, which positions itself as communist in post-communism. With the school, Chto Delat has insisted and persisted with the imagination of another world, one counter to Putin’s Russia, and they insist and persist now, in exile. The School of Emergencies understands itself as a transdisciplinary roaming educational initiative for artists, writers, researchers, and activists:

The urgency of the school was created by the wars in Ukraine and waves of political refugees after growing fascisization of Russian politics and escalation of the war crimes. The school fellows together with mentors and invited teachers are dealing with these issues in the broader context of climate crisis, fossil fascism, austerity measures, crisis of meanings, growing nationalistic tendencies, haunting spirits from the past, dehumanization and urgent demands for decolonization and demilitarization.¹⁸

The School of Emergencies is a strong example of the impossibility of silencing study, demonstrating Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s notion of the undercommons, that we can learn from each other despite being undermined, silenced, and excluded.¹⁹ For this knowledge to circulate, Harney and Moten identify contexts for what they call “study,” the practice of coming together and learning together, can occur everywhere, in institutions, on the street, at night, without predetermined goals, schedules, and credits.²⁰ Study is a form of learning in the interstices of institutions, in the interstices of the economization. It is possible that in neoliberal capitalism, in which education has always pit us unequally against each other, para-institutional spaces—or, para-para-institutional spaces—might emerge in which students study in spite of everything, learners learn in spite of everything, and spaces are created in the middle of, outside of, between, and against institutions in view of another world. This is how we unlearn together and learn from each other another possible world.

At the end of our text, with Brecht and his “Solidarity Song” in mind, we would like to ruminate on a possible other future for which pedagogy certainly plays a role. Consider, in “The Educational Web,” Marianna Fahmy’s imaginations within the climate emergency (at MASS Alexandria), about Chimurenga’s aim to “express the intensities of our world, to capture those forces and to take action” (at RAW Académie) and about Chto Delat’s *Songspiel*.²¹ Brecht’s questions take on new meanings today against the background of neocolonialism and climate activism, and we might read his questions anew: Whose tomorrow is tomorrow? Whose world is the world?

Notes

- 1 The exhibition is curated by Milan Ther and Nicholas Tammens. It is the first exhibition by Milan Ther as the new director of the Kunstverein in Hamburg.
- 2 We would like to thank Lisa Dohmstreich for her thoughtful reflections of the exhibition that complicated and clarified several perspectives on different contributions. During the symposium of “The Educational Web,” she gave short talks about Maumaus, Ibrahim Mahama, and RAW Académie, and her thoughts inform our text.
- 3 *Parting with the Bonus of Youth: Maumaus as Object* (Lisbon: Galerias Municipais de Lisboa/ EGEAC and Maumaus/Lumiar Cité, 2021), back cover.
- 4 *Parting with the Bonus of Youth*, back cover.
- 5 From the description of the exhibition: “‘The Educational Web’ follows the 2005 exhibition ‘A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.’ at the Kunstverein in Hamburg, then under the directorship of Yilmaz Dziewior, and curated by a group including Bart de Baere, Dieter Roelstraete, Charles Esche, Kerstin Niemann, Irit Rogoff, and Angelika Nollert. Produced in collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA), the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, and the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London,” →.
- 6 See Paul O’Neill, Mick Wilson, eds., *Curating and the Educational Turn* (London: Open Editions, 2010).
- 7 Irit Rogoff, “From Criticism to Critique to Criticality,” *transversal*, January 2003, →.
- 8 The question regarding doubt was a leitmotif of the project “Appropriations that might be useful,” with questions and mediation by Lisa Dohmstreich, Agnes Fabich, Markus Haas, and Lennart Jensen in the context of a seminar by Nora Sternfeld and Milan Ther at the Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg (HFBK).
- 9 See →.
- 10 This is especially relevant in Germany as Marilyn Douala Manga Bell has been involved in revisiting and communicating the history of her great-grandfather Rudolf Duala Manga Bell (1873–1914), who was the leader of a movement that resisted German colonial power in Cameroon. Douala Manga Bell is also the co-founder of the Contemporary Art Center doual’art which opened in Douala, Cameroon, in 1991.
- 11 See Koyo Kouoh, ed., *Condition Report: Symposium On Building Art Institutions In Africa/Etat des Lieux: symposium sur la creation d’institutions d’art en Afrique* (Dakar: RAW Material Company; Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2012). The essays here discuss how former colonial powers define and implement strategies of cultural representation and exchange in postcolonial areas and how these strategies influence local dynamics of cultural action.
- 12 See →.
- 13 Ibrahim Mahama, “Parliament of Ghosts,” *Art Africa*, August 13, 2020, →.
- 14 See →.
- 15 See Joseph Vogl, *Kapital und Ressentiment. Eine kurze Theorie der Gegenwart (Capital and Ressentiment: A Brief Theory of the Present)* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2021) and Thomas Biebricher, *Die politische Theorie des Neoliberalismus (The Political Theory of Neoliberalism)* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021).
- 16 Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 63.

- 17 The collective Chto Delat (“What is to be done?”) was founded in early 2003 in Saint Petersburg by a working group of artists, critics, philosophers, and writers with the goal of merging political theory, art, and activism.
- 18 “Art making at the time of emergencies. The short history of Chto Delat collective,” lecture, Hochschule für Bildende Künste Hamburg (HFBK), April 19, 2023, →.
- 19 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).
- 20 Stefano Harney, “On Study,” interview by Tim Edkins, July 2011, →.
- 21 Gözde Filinta, “Who No Know, Go Know”: How to Shift Knowledge about/of Africa Interview with Stacy Hardy – Chimurenga Magazin,” *On Curating* 41 (June 2019), →.

Category

Education

Subject

Neoliberalism, Networks, Art Collectives, Immaterial Labor, Institutional Critique, Curating

Anja Steidinger works as an artist at the intersection of art, politics, and education. From 2006 to 2020 she lived in Barcelona, where she wrote her dissertation on the artistic (self-)representations of unease in the context of the economic crisis in Spain. She is cofounder of the activist artist collective Enmedio and of the mediating film project with and for children La Maleta del Cine. Since winter semester 2020/21 she has been Professor of Art Education at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Hamburg (HFBK), and since 2022, part of INGLAM – Inglourious Art Mediators, a band for lecture performances in Hamburg, and the children’s and youth research theatre network (KJT). Her working method, often based on collaborative research and production, combines antidiscriminatory perspectives with art projects and develops spaces for communication and collective action from artistic intervention and documentation.

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