

# The Art Academic Archipelago

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The islands insist on articulating their own agendas and, at the same time, remain a member of the assemblage. In doing so, they enact a practice, thriving on disagreement and striving to escape the grasp of consensus. The productive dissensus framed by the art academy demonstrates the workings of a democratic institution that counters management aimed at consensus.

The members of the art academy influence each other and still preserve their specificity.<sup>1</sup> When the academy is managed as a matter of reaching agreement and establishing intermediaries, the archipelago is weakened. Individual academic cultures may not conceive of the art academy as an archipelago in which different members play a role in exploration, but rather as territories to be colonized. Therefore, it is one of the most important jobs of management to safeguard academic heterogeneity from both internal and external forces of homogenization.

It is vital that an encounter with another “island” be treated as a question of becoming. Members change, just not in the same manner. Each member develops due to influences from the other members, but they recapture the influence on their own ground. Practices that consolidate and practices that destabilize are different. This is why the archipelago does not fall victim to the homogeneity of the network and its mechanisms of control.

Essentially, the campus frames a struggle between discernible art academic cultures. The institution apparatus is concerned with staging productive conflict and stimulating difference. It is not informed by an overarching idea about consensus that transcends conflicts and solidifies itself through guidelines and definitions of institutional identity.<sup>2</sup> The only thing it can really address directly is friction. If it fails to do so, the tension will dissolve and the archipelago will be nothing more than discrete units. The productive conflict is not a mandatory exposition of disagreement but a staging of meaningful dissensus among the members of the

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<sup>1</sup> Glissant, E. and Obrist, H.U., *100 Notes*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Mouffe, C., *Agonistics*, Verso, 2013, pp. 7–8.

archipelago. Therefore, it is not easily formalized but requires a dynamic map of the different positions and potential touching points. It also opens the academy to society because relevant interlocutors are not always found next door. On the other hand, the way the individual compartments are governed is not the object. The aim should be to let them remain as independent as pragmatically possible within a given context and in relation to external demands. This is certainly a challenge, considering the current state of affairs, but it must be addressed.

Consequently, a map of the problem field of the institution must be drawn through collaboration between management and islands. Otherwise, the two simplistic linearities of top-down versus bottom-up oppose each other. It is true that management should not define content, but if nothing mediates the two vectors, then the freedom of the vector of emergence is captured by mechanisms of self-management. If a map is not drawn as a collective enterprise across the layers of the school, no common institutional agenda can be formulated on academic grounds.

It is a challenge to contemporary management that the academy is a simple structure on the level of the institution as a whole. The reason for this is not that it belongs to an outmoded form of institution, but that dynamic complexity is local.<sup>3</sup> If the ambition is to create complexity in a top-down gesture, it will counteract the dynamics of local complexities. On the other hand, if the local art academic cultures are simply left to themselves, the assemblage is not productive. Finally, if they are approached by management rhetoric of emergent content within a frameset defined from above, they are colonized by mechanisms of self-management. It is just a more effective form of control. This is why the aforementioned map is needed. It allows for both local independence and the creation of a shared field.

The academic ground from which the institution is formed cannot be addressed directly. It might be possible to develop institutional elements aimed at non-hierarchical assemblage and informal connection, but first and foremost, the ground should be treated as potentiality.<sup>4</sup> Among other things, it means that management must come to terms with the fact that the processes that produce content are fundamentally different from the ones that evaluate and inscribe it on an institutional apparatus. If everything constantly needs to manifest itself as a measurable institutional output, in the long run, quality is lowered. One might argue that such is the reality in which we need to operate as an institution. I would reply that such is the reality of the academy.

Artistic practice is, in many ways, a speculative and exploratory companion to concrete political action, and there is not necessarily a direct passage from one to the other. However, true political action will need to disturb the dominant symbolic order.<sup>5</sup> Artistic practice potentially partakes in this process, not necessarily because it is an activist but because it is an open-ended cultural inquiry. I have not tried to suggest a concrete institutional agenda but rather to concentrate on the specific and independent nature of the art academy and the role of artistic practice, because it is insufficiently addressed in its own right. It is symptomatic of the current state of affairs that it is suspect to state that artistic practice has value in itself without instantaneously having to explain what it produces elsewhere. If we were to exclude art from the art academy, through some clever form of inclusion, we would lose one of the practices that guard us from short-sighted political agendas.

The influence of artistic practice is twofold. It promotes an ethical dimension in architectural practice, through experiments developed in architectural media. It challenges the hegemony of discursive formations that have a tendency to close in on themselves and crystallize as indisputable agendas and moral self-certitude.

Secondly, art academic practice partakes in the creation of a concrete political space different from the biopolitical systems of control. I am referring to the dissensus of the art academic archipelago. Therefore, the contemporary challenge from an art academic point of view is how the fundamental mechanism of retreat and agency is activated. It requires that the heterogeneity of the art academy be protected and that institutional agendas for influencing society be formulated on art academic grounds.

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<sup>3</sup> Law, J., 'And if the Global Were Small and Non-Coherent? Method, Complexity and the Baroque', Centre for Science Studies, Lancaster University, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Agamben, G., 'On Potentiality', *Potentialities*, Stanford University Press 1999, p.182.

<sup>5</sup> Zizek, S., 'From Politics to Biopolitics...and Back', *Biopolitics: A Reader*, Duke University Press 2013, p. 401.