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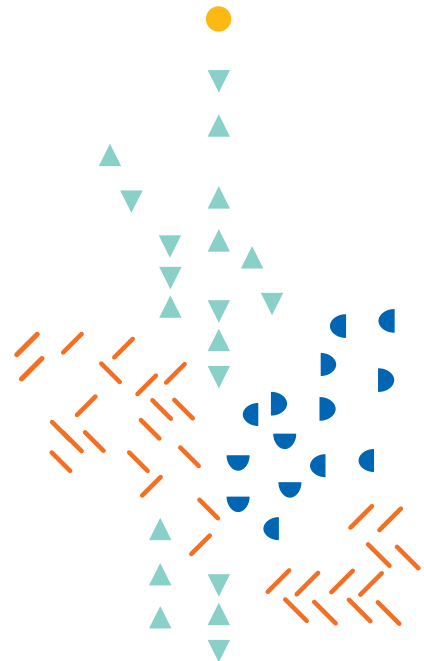
Re-designing Our Realities

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Re-designing Our Realities

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An open air classroom. © The Public School Berlin.

Caleb Waldorf (CW) is an artist currently living in Berlin. Currently he is the Creative Director of the magazine he co-founded in 2007, Triple Canopy. Since 2008, he has served on the committee for The Public School in Los Angeles and Berlin. More on Caleb at: http://calebwaldorf.net

Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga (FLH) works between the realms of art, architecture and urban research. She has been part of the organising committee of The Public School Berlin since 2010. More on Fotini at: http://otherspaces.net

Fiona Geuß (FG) is a PhD candidate at Free University Berlin conduct-ing research on dialogical art work. Since 2010 she has served on the committee of The Public School Berlin. More on Fiona at: www.fionageuss.com

Interviewed by KM.

A SCHOOL
WITH NO CURRICULUM

with Caleb Waldorf, Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga and
Fiona Geuß, The Public School Berlin[1]

The Public School is a school with no curriculum. It was initiated in 2007 in Los Angeles in the basement of an exhibition and performance space called Telic Art Exchange. On The Public School's website, the project is described as 'a framework that supports autodidactic activities, operating under the assumption that everything is in everything.' The school was initially conceived as an experiment to program the art space through a pedagogical system, developing projects and exhibitions out of the classes. While winter was taking its last deep breath, we met three of the current committee members and initiators of the Berlin chapter, Caleb Waldorf, Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga and Fiona Geuß at Archive Books[2] in Berlin-Kreuzberg, where the school is currently hosted.

How do most chapters of The Public School start? Could you talk specifically about The Public School in Berlin?
CW: There isn't an established procedure on a how to start a new school. The initial expansion of The Public School happened through a variety of scenarios: personal networks, people finding out about the project and getting in touch, people from an area where a school was located moving to a new place and hooking up with others to begin a school, and so on.
The Public School Berlin's origin had a different character than the other schools. In the summer of 2010, Sean Dockray, Fiona Whitton[3] and I organised a thirteen day itinerant seminar called 'There is nothing less passive than the act of fleeing...'[4] The seminar took the form of an open reading group, where the texts discussed each day resonated with the site selected. The seminar wasn't directly supported by any

1   http://thepublicschool.org/berlin
2   Archive is a platform for cultural research, debate and production located in Berlin-Kreuzberg. More info: www.archivebooks.org
3   Sean Dockray and Fiona Whitton are the directors of Telic Arts Exchange, which initiated the first school in 2008 in Los Angeles.
4   http://apubliclibrary.org/thereisnothinglesspassive/thantheactoffleeing.html

institutions in the city and we advertised it through our existing communication channels. This meant we didn't have a clear sense of how the seminar would unfold. Who would attend? Would people come once or repeatedly? Would anyone even show up?! We were taken aback by the turnout. The lowest attendance we had one day was four or five people, but several days there were as many as thirty. While only one person (other than Sean, Fiona and I) made it every day, many came to over half the meetings. The group of people that seemed the most committed, became the first committee of the school in Berlin. We had a few meetings after the seminar and then we launched the project here in September of that year.

What is the organisational structure behind The Public School?

CW: With regards to the broader organisational structure, it has changed over time and it will likely be modified in the future. The Public School is effectively the online platform that supports and connects its local institutions. Each school has a rotating committee that assists in the coordination of proposals to organise classes and meetings. In the first versions of the platform, the schools were largely detached from one another; each occupying their own sub-domain with minimal connectivity between the branches. In the last iteration of the platform[5] this changed to make things more fluid between schools by centralising proposals, only keeping classes and meetings as localised events. It hasn't worked exactly as anticipated, but a new version of the platform is in the works to rectify some of the issues we've seen emerge over the last few years. We are hoping that it negotiates the macro-view of the project and the specificity of its local variations more successfully. There will also be some features that people can use if they don't have a school in their city.

So there are all the different chapters with their own approaches, but in general, they all share the idea of 'a school with no curriculum'?

FLH: Each school ends up taking a slightly different direction, based on the group that is involved and the context where the school is located. But it all works through the same online platform and operates on the idea that there is no curriculum that is prepared and decided in advance. As Caleb mentioned, in the previous versions of the website, each city was more independent, but now there is the possibility to share class proposals regardless of which city they originate from. In this way, a common pool of ideas, desires and interests comes into being, which can then find different manifestations in the various schools.

I was involved with The Public School in Helsinki, being on the committee for some months. Is there still a rotating committee as there was back then?

CW: Each school handles the committee rotation differently. For that aspect of the project to function, there must be new classes and meetings. If the school

is inactive, there aren't new people participating, which makes finding new committee members difficult.

The Public School can take a lot of energy to maintain. I've been on the committee for … well, I've never been off the committee (laughs)! I haven't rotated off, but I've definitely become less active for periods of time. I think for most involved, other aspects of life — work, travel, family — inevitably takes over and requires stepping away from the school. This,

IT OPENS UP A SPACE FOR NEW INPUTS AND IDEAS ON HOW A SCHOOL CAN BE RUN

I think, is a good thing as it opens up a space for new inputs and ideas on how a school can be run.

There are a lot of learning initiatives popping up right now, and they all have their own kind of way of setting up their organisational structure. Was there any funding involved or was it all on a voluntary basis so far?

CW: Telic Arts Exchange[6] is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organisation,[7] which received grants and individual donations — the largest of which was from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. The Public School has received support from Telic Arts Exchange to assist in website maintenance and hosting. There isn't, however, any support for the day-to-day operation of the various school or the 'mothership', it is all volunteer.

FG: In terms of the school in Berlin, we are still operating without a budget, besides the website costs. We are lucky at the moment, compared to other schools, to have a key to this space, Archive Books, so that we can use this room whenever we want to. And before coming here the school was hosted at PROGRAM[8] for a year and a half. From my point of view having a permanent location is very important for the school. Of course having some proper funding would also make other things possible, for example enable the school to have a more consistent program. But the school does not only consist out of spatial and online infrastructure but mainly of the people actively involved in it. And this voluntary work has to be made available every time by each person involved from all sides. At the same time those kinds of relations rely on trust and solidarity, which also influence how a project functions and you never know what happens once money gets involved.

CW: There have been different economic models over the history of the school(s). Some have charged a small amount for classes. That money would typically go

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5 Launched in the autumn of 2012.

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6 Telic Arts Exchange provides a place for multiple publics to engage with contemporary forms of media, art and architecture. Its program emphasises social exchange, interactivity and public participation to produce a critical engagement with new media and culture. More info: www.telic.info/about

7 501(c) stands for tax-exempt non-profit organisation in the United States. Section 501(c) of the United States Internal Revenue Code (26 U.S.C. § 501(c)) provides that 29 types of non-profit organisations are exempt from some federal income taxes. Source: Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/501%28c%29_organization

8 PROGRAM is a non-profit project aimed at testing the disciplinary boundaries of architecture through collaborations with other fields. Initiated in 2006 by Carson Chan and Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga, PROGRAM has provided a discursive platform for artists, architects, critics and curators to explore ideas through exhibitions, performances, workshops, lectures, and residencies. More info: www.programonline.de

Inside the class room. © The Public School Berlin.

to pay the rent or teachers' fees. At different times there has been the idea of each school sharing the burden of website hosting costs and of the maintenance of the platform those conversations have never made it too far. This approach might differentiate The Public School from the 'free-school' model as there isn't an explicit mandate that it be free. It also distinguishes it from something like Trade School, which replaces one economic model (based on money), with another economic model (based on **barter**). My main concern is that the project be sustainable within a given context.

FG: Also, it's obviously different when you decide to have your own space.

This method of proposing a class and then making it real is really interesting. As you said before, people don't necessarily need to be experts if they want to teach something. Is that also the idea behind, as in the educational approach? Are there some theories that inspired you?

CW: The schematic is fairly simple: people post things that they want to learn about or teach or want to see happen. Then, a group of people gathers around that topic and the committee assists in materialising that idea. The structure of a class — a lecture, a reading group, a hands-on workshop — emerges from how people want to approach a given concept, idea, knowledge, task, or whatever. However, it rarely happens that way, which is likely more a reflection upon the expectation of what a school, or cultural space, should be, rather than the school's internal logic.

FG: We did around fifty classes, and maybe three or four of them were taught by professional teachers.

CW: Yes, every scenario plays out differently, it's not so much that it MUST be a peer-to-peer-system. Rather, it's about finding the best way to address a certain concept or idea at a given moment, in a given place. You may not always learn much about a certain topic, but you definitely learn about how people deal with knowledge in an unfamiliar setting! It can sometimes be very

YOU DEFINITELY LEARN ABOUT HOW PEOPLE DEAL WITH KNOWLEDGE IN AN UNFAMILIAR SETTING

frustrating, of course, but it can be fascinating to see how different people encounter one another and negotiate the terms of the relationship they are now engaged in. The committee or the person facilitating has some responsibility to calibrate that experience to be productive.

FLH: There is often an ongoing negotiation while the class is unfolding. This happens during the meetings and online. It's not always predetermined how often a class will take place, or what shape the meetings will have.

How has it been with the classes – is there and has there been a certain focus? I mean, a school without curriculum could be anything...

FLH: Even though there are no rules on what kind of classes can take place here, a lot of classes end up revolving around some specific theoretical and political interests or questions. The school creates itself as it happens. People gather around the classes that are taking place and new proposals often come out of those contexts. But it doesn't have to be like that.

FG: That's specific to the school in Berlin, there are not so much hands-on-classes. But we did have a **Situationist**[9] jogging class! (everyone laughs).

FLH: And there was the Arabic language class for a few weeks in 2011, a Russian cinema class, among others... It just depends on the community that happens to gather around the school at certain times.

CW: There is also a filtration built into the system. The committee is made of the three of us who are activating proposals they see as most interesting, or that they think would be important to see take place. Those classes can introduce new people to the project, who could subsequently join the committee. The focus changes over time, it is a slowly mutating organism.

A certain agenda or set of concerns can be introduced by inviting someone to the committee who is different than those currently on it. I think it's something we were more attentive to in Los Angeles. We always wanted the committee to be as diverse as possible. This opens up the possibility to have a cocktail-making class and a critical theory seminar on the same day! In Berlin there has been a certain specificity since the majority of people involved come from the extended, and international, cultural landscape of Berlin. Additionally, most of the classes have been in English. These factors have influenced what takes place here. But, these features are emergent, they aren't controlled exactly. In other words, there is no external hierarchical system determining what takes place.

It's also the people who propose classes, right, so I guess if there are people interested in doing a cocktail class, they just suggest it.

FLH: Yes. But then there is also the limitations of the space where we are hosted

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9 Situationist theory, introduced by the artist group Situationist International, sees the situation as a tool for the liberation of everyday life, a method of negating the pervasive alienation that accompanied the spectacle. Source: Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situationist_International

at the moment. I know Fiona has been wanting to do a cheese-making class, for example, but we're not sure the facilities here can support that! (laughs) But anyone can propose anything, yes!

How do you reach out to people, how do people know about The Public School?
FG: We haven't been doing any kind of major publicity. It happens organically through the community of the school, somehow, and then through our newsletter, the website, the channels of the space that hosts us.

How many people are involved in Berlin?
CW: In Berlin, I think there are around 800 people who signed up on the website. Globally, there are around 10 000 registered users.

I'm impressed!
CW: Yeah, it is cool! But, I don't know what that number means exactly. In Berlin, the project can only accommodate so many participants, not only in terms of how many people the room fits, but also in terms of how much can be organised. We are a very small committee with spatial restraints. That directly influences the amount of activity that can take place.

It's a nice thing to support the idea of, of being able to attend interesting classes, to meet up with strangers and talk about philosophy and all sorts of things. Even if education is free in places like Germany and Finland, it doesn't mean that you can just walk into the university and take part in any lecture you want.

THE WAY TO DEAL WITH THE FACT THAT OUR EXISTING INSTITUTIONS ARE FAILING US, IS TO BUILD NEW ONES THAT OPERATE WITH DIFFERENT SENSIBILITIES

CW: Right. It has to do with methodology. The Public School has no curriculum. The removal, if you can call it that, of this typical aspect of education, questions how discourse is organised, communicated and circulated. That doesn't mean that it's a full-frontal attack on the current dominant educational system. The Public School is experimenting with what it means to be an educational space now, a space of politics, and a space of community-building. From my perspective, the way to deal with the fact that our existing institutions are failing us, is to build new ones that operate with different sensibilities.

Have you been collaborating or in touch with other initiatives that are similar or that you're aware of?
FLH: There have been a couple of occasions when we were invited to participate in exhibitions or discussions here in Berlin, so we got to meet some people who are involved in similar initiatives.
CW: There is solidarity amongst different projects. But, it can be complex for the school to collaborate with other projects since it's already a collaborative framework.

You mentioned there is going to be another iteration coming up soon — what does the future of The Public School look like?
FG: We occasionally organise a class called 'The Future of the Public School Berlin', which is mainly about gathering people around the school, re-introducing the project and trying to generate proposals on the spot that can later be turned into classes. That's basically how it is — as long as there are proposals, there will be classes, and there will be the school.
FLH: These events are a good opportunity to get together, to introduce the project to a few new people who come by and generate some more input.
CW: The school has, like all of the other schools, its own kind of character. I think with Berlin, with the specificity of the city of so many people coming and going, it's difficult to maintain a consistent level of energy. Also, we haven't had any heating here for most of the winter, so that also informed our decisions on the programming (laughs). Spring will bring a burst of warmth and energy!
The next iteration of the online platform of The Public School will explore some new organisational paradigms and motifs, as well as optimise the existing structure. After seven years, it feels like it is the right time to further the experiment and try something new.

Thank you very much for the interview!

Outside the space hosting the classes. © The Public School Berlin.