

SHOW & TELL

HIGHER EDUCATION

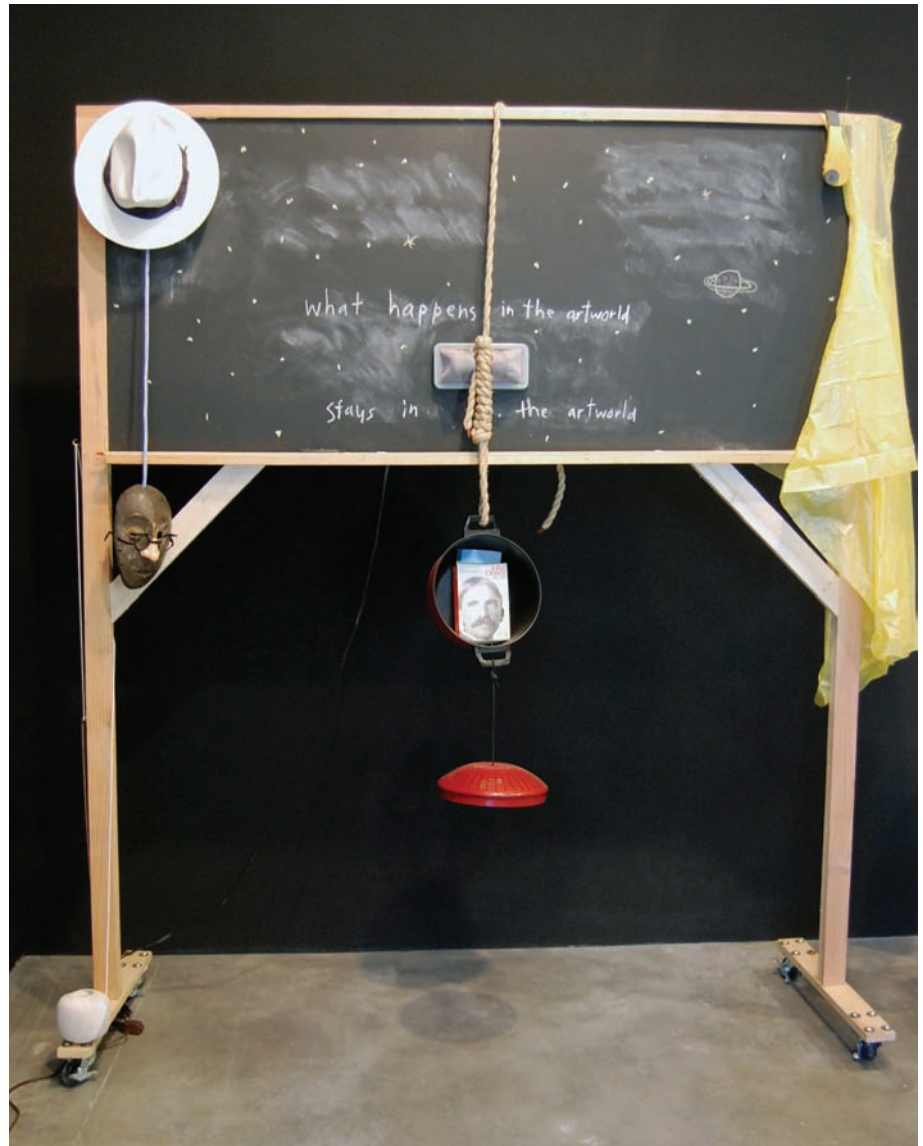
Adapting the model of school and the process of learning to artistic purposes, a number of artists, working individually and in collaboratives, are turning the conventional practices of educational institutions on their heads.

BY CARLY BERWICK

JOHN DEWEY'S MUSTACHIOED face stares out from the cover of a book inside a large unlidded pot. The pot holding the paperback sways from a thick rope attached to the top of a freestanding chalkboard. The rope dangles between and is propelled by two very breast-like nodules—part of a massage chair mechanism, actually—that gyrate in opposite directions. The device has been inserted into the middle of the chalkboard, which bears the words “what happens in the artworld / stays in the artworld.”

Dewey, 20th-century America’s premier philosopher of pragmatism and education, might not have had such risqué allusions in mind when he championed learning through hands-on experience. The chalkboard installation was part of an exhibition, at New York’s Susan Inglett Gallery [Dec. 8, 2009–Jan. 23, 2010], by the Bruce High Quality Foundation, a group of about a half-dozen young artists in New York, mostly men and mostly former students at Cooper Union. In addition to their impromptu public performances, which have included tackling famous sculptures in makeshift football

The Bruce High Quality Foundation University (BHQFU): *What Happens in the Artworld Stays in the Artworld*, 2009, chalkboard and mixed mediums, 84 by 75 by 22½ inches. Courtesy Susan Inglett Gallery, New York.



CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Work by Bruce High Quality Foundation at the Whitney Biennial [through May 30], in “1969” at P.S.1 [through Apr. 5] and at Recess gallery [through Mar. 20]. The BHQF-organized invitational “Brucennial 2010: Miseducation” at 350 W. Broadway, New York [through Apr. 4].

gear, the “Bruces,” as they’re popularly known, have taken on pedagogy as an art form. The group launched the Bruce High Quality Foundation University in September 2009, the most recent and perhaps prominent

example in the burgeoning genre of schools-as-art projects.

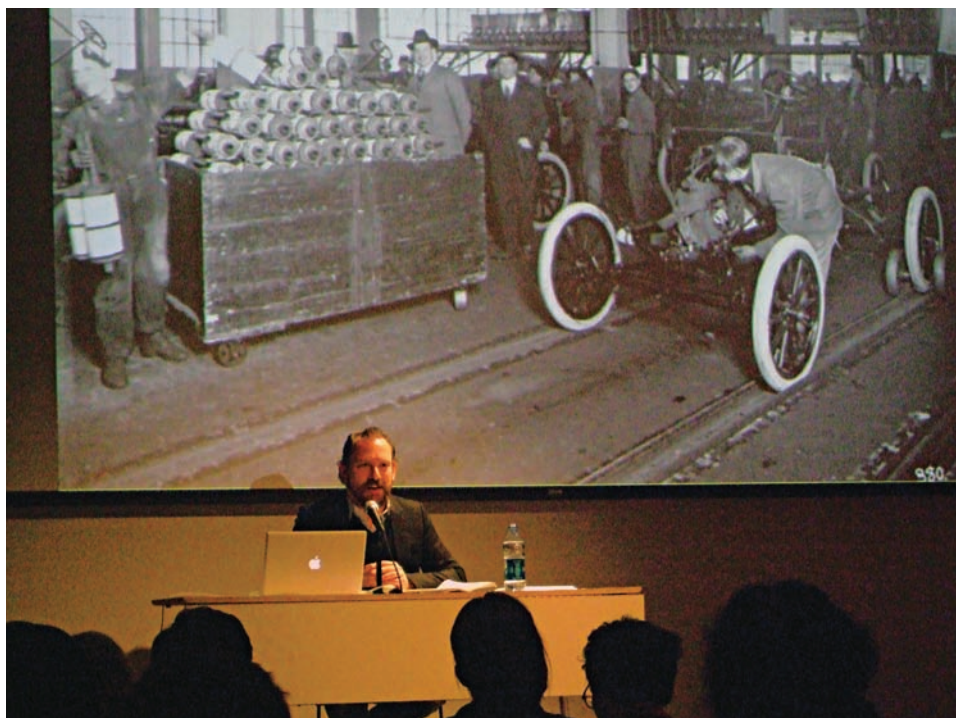
Partially funded by Creative Time, the Bruce High Quality Foundation University (BHQFU) is located in a ramshackle second-floor loft on West

IN THE SPIRIT OF RADICAL EDUCATION THEORISTS, THESE SCHOOLS MAKE LITTLE DISTINCTION BETWEEN TEACHER AND STUDENT. THE PRESUMPTION IS THAT EVERYONE HAS KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS.

consider them distinct art forms (and that they offer a broad range of subjects beyond art). Organizers adopt the language of education to perform transactions that amount to performance or information art, in the tradition of Gordon Matta-Clark and Hans Haacke. At BHQFU, anyone can suggest a class or program and offer to teach or organize it. A simi-

lar setup is in effect with the Public School, which started in Los Angeles in 2008 and has "branches" organized by local groups in New York, Paris, Brussels, San Juan, Chicago and, most recently, Philadelphia. In the spirit of radical education theorists such as the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), these schools make little distinction between teacher and student. The presumption is that everyone has knowledge and skills, and learning can take place as an exchange among relative equals.

Other ongoing, free, artist-run schools that similarly advocate a breakdown in the hierarchy between teacher and student, catering mainly to urban post-grads of all ages, include Fritz Haeg's Los Angeles-based Sundown Schoolhouse; the long-running 16 Beaver in Manhattan, organized by Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri, which holds weekly discussions, readings and other activities; and, in Brooklyn, Mary Walling Blackburn's Anhoek School and the School of the Future, the latter allied with the group Teaching Artist Union and run by artists Cassie Thornton and Chris Kennedy. In addition, there are dozens of related efforts, composed of online libraries (such as a.aaaarg.org) and e-mail lists of upcoming free or low-cost lectures and seminars (Platform for Pedagogy).



Above, view of the Night School session "Liam Gillick: Three Short Texts on the Necessity of Creating an Economy of Equivalence," March 2008. Courtesy New Museum, New York.

Right, view of BHQFU's "Occult Shenanigans," 2009, New York. Courtesy BHQFU.

Broadway in Tribeca. Folding chairs, ashtrays, books, beer cans and an unplugged overhead projector form the decor, a kind of destitute bohemian post-grad chic. Many nights last fall, a collection of artists, writers and grad students shuffled in for discussions on the philosophy of film or the meaning of metaphor, offerings that might fit in with any MFA program today.

But unlike conventional, accredited schools, the BHQFU is free, peer-run and peer-taught. While there have been artist-run schools in the past, what's different about the latest endeavors is that their creators





Phil Glau (right) speaking at the Public School, Los Angeles, January 2010. Photo Telic Arts Exchange.

The most successful (i.e., functional) ventures share several common elements based on the abiding metaphor of school. They have scheduled gatherings for which people show up; they have teachers, who may also be students but presumably have a desirable skill or body of knowledge to share; they provide suggested reading lists; they have free libraries, usually online; and they are open to the public, although some require applications.

At the BHQFU, the classes typically lead to more than just talk and epiphany: because most of the teachers and students are artists, the participants tend to make things. A course called "The Artist at Work" in fall 2009, for instance, entailed an in-depth discussion of a Camus short story of the same title, led by artist Sophy Naess. That led to a script, set design, video, and display of the sets and props as they were being worked on by the artists at Recess, a project space in SoHo, where the BHQF artists are in residence through Mar. 20.

WITHIN THE PAST YEAR, the classes offered at many of these artist schools have become increasingly self-reflexive in their analyses of the educational system. During one December week in New York, an intrepid would-be student could head off to both the BHQFU's Bring Your Own University and the Public School's The Future of the Public School. At the final Bring Your Own University class last semester, proposals for new classes were floated. These included an online radio program and an art psychotherapy class. The former met with mild enthusiasm while the psychotherapy proposal engendered seemingly endless queries, a Socratic exercise to help the woman proposing it define her idea more clearly. It seemed ill-suited to a class format and a bit earnest for the kind of clever, lightly ironic touch favored by the Bruces.

Anyone with an Internet connection can submit a proposal to the Public School. A rotating committee affiliated with the organizers in each city vets the classes and posts them online, where potential students can

indicate their interest, or lack thereof. The first Public School was launched in 2008 in Los Angeles by artist and former architect Sean Dockray and his co-director at the nonprofit Telic Arts Exchange, Fiona Whitton. "We wanted the school to function as an unstructured public forum. That would mean the school doesn't have a curriculum, that it isn't decided in advance by experts," Dockray explains.¹ Classes hew to frontal lobe gymnastics, with subjects such as nomadism, neoliberalism and avant-garde cinema, but the school has also offered practical lessons in computer programming, sewing, and canning and pickling. The New York iteration is called the Public School (for Architecture) but class subjects are as broad as at the others, encompassing topics from concepts of public space to urban bike riding.

Brooklyn's Anhoek School is a smaller enterprise, but this project of multimedia artist Mary Walling

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL (I.E., FUNCTIONAL) VENTURES SHARE SEVERAL COMMON ELEMENTS BASED ON THE METAPHOR OF SCHOOL: SCHEDULED GATHERINGS, TEACHERS, READING LISTS AND FREE LIBRARIES.

Invention of Possession,” a two-week course (most expenses were covered by the participants’ bartering of services) that encompassed visits to U.S. border patrol headquarters, the Chinati Foundation and a segregated graveyard, where, Blackburn recalled, the Latino side of the cemetery was just “dust and homemade markers” in contrast to the well-maintained Anglo

THE REMARKABLE GROWTH of the artist-run free school coincides with a critical mass of post-studio artists educated, incidentally, at art schools. They are well-versed in contemporary theory, which means that they are adept at theorizing their own artistic production and the institutions that helped form its biases. The post-1980s transformation of art schools from skill-based institutions to hotbeds of conceptual inquiry is traced in the recently published *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, a collection of ruminations by artists and scholars on what a contemporary art school should be. As contributor and Yale School of Art dean Robert Storr puts it, “Genius needs no education,” at least according to popular great-man theories, yet off to post-secondary study most ambitious artists continue to go, at a cost.² The Bruces explicitly frame their university as a challenge to pricey MFAs and to the presumed use value of degrees for artists.

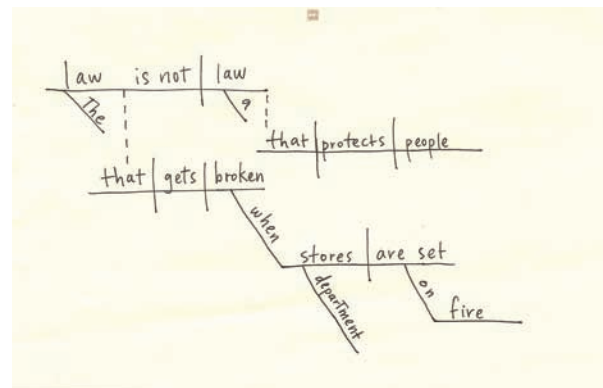
At the same time, cheap access to organizing tools on the Internet helps these schools-as-exhibitions make good on the hopes of earlier radical educators. Theorist Ivan Illich, for example, wanted to abolish traditional

schools in favor of informal peer networks. “Any man, at any given moment and at a minimum price,” he foresaw, “could identify himself to a computer with his address and telephone number, indicating the book, article, film, or recording on which he seeks a partner for discussion. Within days he could receive by mail the



Above, view of the Anhoek School course “Stealing Horses: The Invention of Possession,” Marfa, Tex., summer 2009, with performance artist Megan Palaima at a local barbershop while fellow students observe.

Right, a student’s sentence diagram from Anhoek School’s “Teachers Fuck Students: Marginal Pedagogies: Lesson 2,” New York, spring 2009. Photos this page courtesy Anhoek School.



Blackburn rigorously questions the fundamental assumptions and aspirations of any school. Blackburn’s first seminar in spring 2009, “The Mutinous Classroom: Outlaws with Books,” was self-reflexive from the start—a class about taking classes—positing that “bad” students might ask the best questions. Last summer, she took a half-dozen adult students—mostly artists and writers—to Marfa, Tex., for “Stealing Horses: The

side. Blackburn herself questions the necessity of compulsory education for kids, permanent schools, art schools, and even artist-run schools for artists and grants to artists for artist-run schools for artists. “Fat-grant accreditation,” she calls it. Applying for and receiving grants, cautions Blackburn, who claims to have done neither, “complicates the critique that the ‘institution is ill’ because the school is now part of the institution.”

list of others who recently had taken the same initiative. This list would enable him by telephone to arrange for a meeting with persons who initially would be known exclusively by the fact that they requested a dialogue about the same subject.” Illich wrote that in 1971.³ While at times he was so revolutionary as to appear conservative (he railed against the hobbling effects of the welfare state), his most progressive ideas about



The Public School (for Architecture) organized the "Public School for Rubbing" in cooperation with Dexter Sinister, November 2009. The class was held at Blank SLB, New York. Photo David Reinfurt.

post-secondary education have been put into place fairly easily and with a minimum of ideological commotion by the Public School.

From another perspective, schools-as-art projects, or exhibitions-as-schools, as the young New York-based artist Anton Vidokle puts it, fulfill the initial promise of "relational aesthetics." Curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term in the 1990s to describe work that enacted "ways of living and models of action within the existing real,"⁴ such as, most famously, Rirkrit Tiravanija's cooking projects. A decade after artists had seemingly exhausted the ways in which they could serve food, tend bar, redo lobbies and make hotels of museums, a new wave sought to recast these temporary exercises, usually confined within museum or gallery walls, as lifelong learning experiences, in the manner of the most optimistic continuing education courses.

OF COURSE, ARTISTS have long administered their own schools, of a sort, stretching back to the Renaissance master's studio. Artists were also at the helm of royal academies. The founding of the Bauhaus in 1919 established the model of the interdisciplinary artist-run school as a generator of new forms. After the school's closure by the Nazis in 1933, Bauhaus professors and refugees Josef and Anni Albers helped establish the grade-free, faculty-run Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1933; it closed in 1957. And Joseph Beuys's 1965 lecture-performance *How to Explain Paintings to a Dead Hare* is a touchstone for BHQF, who riffed on it in the performance and text *Explaining Pictures to a Dead Bull*, a critique of art schools' complicity with the art market.

More recently, in 2006, Vidokle was invited, along with curators Mai Abu Eidahab of Egypt and Florian Waldvogel of Germany, to organize Manifesta 6 in Cyprus. The curatorial team decided to circumvent the biennial format and present a temporary art school. "Important art has the capacity to change you," says Vidokle, who also runs e-flux.com, an e-mail-based network for art professionals. "And

education is probably the most transformative experience or structure: it's slow and gradual but actually changes the audience." Education, of course, can come in many forms: lectures, dinner-table conversations, autodidactic reading, etc. For artists such as Vidokle, the school format serves mainly as a framing device.

Manifesta 6 was canceled, however, because of political conflict. (The organizers had scheduled classes in both the Turkish and Greek areas of Nicosia, Cyprus's divided capital, and balked when officials insisted that activities be held only on the Greek side.) Vidokle moved the project to Berlin, where it became unitednationsplaza, a collaborative two-year "exhibition-as-school."

Classes and teachers were carefully chosen: Martha Rosler conducted a seminar on "Art and Social Life; The Case of Video Art," while Walid Raad and Jalal Toufic offered the inscrutably titled "The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster." There were suggested readings and prior registration was encouraged.

"It's important to note I was not interested in a new model of education but a new model of artistic practice," Vidokle says. He acknowledges predecessors such as the École Temporaire in Paris, run by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe from 1998 to 1999, and the Copenhagen Free University, run by Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen out of their apartment in 2001.

Vidokle and curator Eungie Joo brought unitednationsplaza to the New Museum in New York in 2008 and called it Night School. Joo attributes her own interest in the exhibition-as-school concept to the lack of "participatory space" for experimentation at a time when market forces seem overbearing. "There's so much visible power and influence of market dynamics," she observes. "By determining the discourse around art, by developing the

“FREE” CAN BE ANOTHER GRANT-GETTING TOOL FOR ARTISTS, ARGUES CURATOR ADAM KLEINMAN, WHO CHALLENGED THE NEW YORK PUBLIC SCHOOL FOUNDERS ON THIS POINT. IN RESPONSE, THEY INVITED HIM TO HOST A CLASS.

number of people who are involved in it, artists do take back some power.”

In 2005, at the same time that Vidokle was developing his plan for Manifesta 6, artists Erik Wesley and Piero Golia launched the Mountain

around the work—not letting it just be an afterthought.” Dancers taught animal movements to Whitney Biennial visitors, for instance, as part of Haeg’s contribution to the 2008 edition.

Openness, flexibility and horizontal structures do have their problems, though. In New York, the Public School’s most internally debated course was the seemingly prosaic “Stupid Rhino Tricks,” a course on how to use Rhino 3D architectural software. The selection committee wanted to be sure it wouldn’t be the same kind of course available at a local college, according to Todd Rouhe of the architectural group Common Room, which organized the New York school. In the

Artistic Practice—at what or who’s [sic] cost,” attracted 18 people, and the archived discussion on the Public School website is a valuable resource for this emerging genre.

Ultimately, art and education are both vehicles for the transmission of culture. Since the 19th-century popularization of the museum and universal education, both are expected to be publicly accessible and, if not free, to at least offer an edifying return on investment. At their most sincere, the new artist-run schools are about “people converging on a thought or interest or a direction,” as Haeg puts it. By making education part of their practice—teaching others to view the process of learning differently—these artists are fulfilling John Dewey’s most famous aphorism: “Education is not a preparation for life; it is life itself.” ○



Morning movement session at Fritz Haeg’s Sundown Schoolhouse, Los Angeles, autumn 2009. Photo Mark Rodriguez.

School from the Mountain Bar in Los Angeles’s Chinatown, which was followed in that city by Fritz Haeg’s Sundown Schoolhouse in 2006. Haeg devoted himself to the school in his “geodesic home” for one semester before taking the enterprise on the road. “When you are working with a museum, there’s this hierarchy where the curatorial department decides what is exhibited and the education department figures out how to interpret that work for the public,” he explains. “I’m interested in developing my own educational programming

end, two teachers collaborated on an elaborate presentation that taught the software by demonstrating how *not* to use it. One person showed up.

“Free” can also be another tool for artists to use the public as grant-getting opportunities, argues Adam Kleinman, curator at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, who challenged the New York Public School organizers on just this point (Common Room received a Van Alen Institute grant to start the school). In response, they invited Kleinman to host a class. The result, “Free Schools as

1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotes were gathered through in-person or phone interviews and e-mails in December 2009 and January 2010. **2** Robert Storr, “Dear Colleague,” in Steven Henry Madoff, ed., *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2009, p. 53. **3** Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, Harmondsworth, England, Pelican Books, 1971, p. 11. **4** Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon, Les Presse du Réel, English edition, 2002.

- To attend a class at the BHQFU in New York, e-mail student leaders via the website bhqfu.org.
- To attend a semester-long class at the Anhoek School, see anhoekschool.org. Classes require pre-registration and sometimes an application.
- Ongoing class information for the Public School can be found at thepublicschool.org.
- Information on movement classes at the Sundown Schoolhouse can be found at fritzhag.com.

The Bourriaud and Illich book chapters cited in this article were downloaded from a.aaaarg.org, a library (with questionable, but in practice little questioned, legal standing) of user-uploaded texts.

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