

Robert Filliou: *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*
- Ina Blom

In her introduction to the English edition of Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Kristin Ross underscores the way in which social inequality is upheld by a certain temporal logic peculiar to pedagogics, reproducing the very inequalities that educational institutions are supposedly devoted to undoing in offering all students the same body of knowledge. The temporal logic in question is the temporality of delay. Delay or temporal distance is key to a pedagogical logic whereby the student is informed that knowledge – and with it the attainment of social equality with the teacher – will come in the future, as a result of sufficient study. The pedagogical institution thus erects and systematically maintains the 'distance separating a future reconciliation from a present inequality'.¹ Inspired by the example of Joseph Jacotot's early nineteenth-century experiments with collective attainment of expertise, Rancière asks why, instead of taking for granted the position of inequality, the pedagogical institution and its ideologues do not start from the premise of equality? Why this delay, this promise always pushed to the future?

Rancière's book was first published in 1987, echoing concerns carried forth by the 1968 student revolts in France. In 1968, the French artist Robert Filliou was hard at work on his own contribution to pedagogical thought, notably the collection of texts, letters, interviews and blank spaces for reader comments published in 1970 as *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*. In this work, which sums up the peculiar brand of living poetics that Filliou had been developing since the late 1950s, it is above all the question of the temporality of equality that takes centre stage. Equality is not only the non-disputable point of departure for his project – it is also associated with immediacy, the irruption of a distinct *sense* of the here and now. That sense is not, however, associated with competence. It is not even necessarily associated with the higher levels of cognition. When providing an example of indisputable equality, countering the hierarchies that permeate everyday social experience, Filliou points to sleep – a state of being having 'no capacity for reflexivity within its own conditions',² exemplifying the dumb equality of supine, unthinking bodies.³ Elsewhere, and in a more romantically inclined mood with echoes of Surrealist and Situationist thought, he evokes the way in which

¹ Kristin Ross, 'Translator's Introduction', in Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, p.xix.

² Matthew Fuller, *How to Sleep. The Art, Biology and Culture of Unconsciousness*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2018, p.1.

³ Robert Filliou, 'Poetical Economy: Towards a new Standard of Value. Three Propositions', in *Teaching and Learning and as Performing Arts*, Cologne: Verlag Gebr. König, 1970, p.78, available at https://monoskop.org/images/9/93/Robert_Filliou_Teaching_and_Learning_as_Performing_Arts.pdf (last accessed on 3 June 2020).

'*le rêve des hommes fait événement*' ('the dreams of men come true').⁴ Generally, however, it is not the realm of dreams that informs Filliou's pedagogical-political visions. They tend, more provocatively and less intuitively, towards general, if benign, stupidity – expressed through a predisposition for laziness, lack of discipline, 'thoughtless' spontaneity and improvisation.

Longstanding debates in and around the avant-garde on the exact nature of the relation between art and labour seem to have crystallised around Duchamp's elegant withdrawal from the struggle of art production. Philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato and collective artist Claire Fontaine both understand it as politically aligned with the refusal of work and the wage form that reemerged as a radical perspective in autonomist Marxism.⁵ Yet, while the 'laziness' of both Duchamp and Filliou may be seen in the light of the subversively Marxist perspectives presented in Paul Lafargue's 1883 book *The Right to be Lazy*, their respective brands of non-activity are nonetheless distinctly different. Against Duchamp, the disinterested selector of factory-produced merchandise (all equal under the logic of commodity exchange) Filliou presents his own highly specific type of artistic subjectivity: The *génie du café* ('café genius'). An evident *détournement* of the myth of artistic genius, the concept of the *génie du café* not only undoes the dichotomy of work and non-work – it also introduces a particular temporal modus.

For the *génie du café* is less a non-worker than a shirker – avoiding work or refusing to take it too seriously rather than refusing it altogether. His or her special talents are above all small-scale social: they operate in an environment defined by the strictly temporary equality that is the hallmark of informal and probably substance-induced conviviality. The 'génie' of the *génie du café* is all at once that of the inconsequential small-talker and of the hyperbolic bigmouth – both entertaining, but neither seen as authorities. Unlike the groundbreaking work of the artist-genius, the activities of the café genius are not taken to have any specific bearing on the future. Characterised by a talent for spontaneous repartee and the serendipity of more or less luminous associations, animating a tiny crowd that may disperse at any moment, they define the essence of the momentary – the ephemerality of a here and now that does not pretend to set a specific example. Nobody *aspires* to become a *génie du café*, and the *génie du café* generally does not set a standard somebody might hope one day to live up to. In short, what the café genius embodies is not the spirit that pits great achievement against (equally great) abandon, but the spirit of failure – *minor* failure, that is. Filliou was quite clear about this. Calling for an *hommage aux ratés* ('hommage to losers'), he specifically wanted to celebrate what the French call *l'esprit d'escalier* – that is, the small regrets one

⁴ Robert Filliou, 'Letter to Allan Kaprow (March 1967)' in *Teaching and Learning and as Performing Arts*, *op.cit.*, p.46.

⁵ Maurizio Lazzarato, *Marcel Duchamp and the Refusal of Work*, trans. Joshua David Jordan, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014.

may experience having just left a social situation and recalling something one (of course!) *should have* said, but didn't. The genius of never getting it exactly right. Versus Duchamp's shocking *refusal*, the everyday banality of the *badly done*.

As a framework for pedagogy, this is definitely among the more exotic. Yet its significance can be gauged by the extent to which the quest for a foundational, originary, equality between teacher and students is not based on abstract ideals or an ethics of humility, but, more pragmatically, on the example of an entirely familiar social situation – one that could be, and was, exemplified in certain types of artistic work. This was Filliou's personal understanding of the budding *practice* of performance in the field of art in the early '60s: neither an artistic form nor genre, but a heuristic point of departure for experimenting with collective living and also a poetics for undoing the very distinction between teaching and learning. It is to this end that *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts* includes not just samples of his own performative-poetic work, such as the manuscript for *Ample Food for Stupid Thought* (basically a score for generating endless, insignificant small-talk) – but long exchanges with artist friends like Allan Kaprow, John Cage and Joseph Beuys.⁶ Many would of course point out that the projects of each of these artists convey a sense of scope and dedication at odds with Filliou's emphatically amateurish-looking, disintegrating productions – works that seem to constitute the threadbare underbelly of that realm of shiny new things that put its indelible stamp on newly industrialised post-war France. But what Filliou saw in the work of these artists was a general dedication to immanent social experimentation, based on non-specialised and intuitive forms of inventiveness. If the 'world of creation' is 'the good for nothing world', then art as a performative/communicative realm represented the crucial 'contact between the good for nothing' in yourself 'and the good for nothing in others', he wrote.⁷ Beuys, a more solemn artist-pedagogue persona, would probably not have put it that way.

With hindsight, it is easy to see in this pedagogy similarities with the practical ethos of rock music, which was erupting in culture at the same time: there is the same celebration of stupidity, serendipity and minor failure, the same spontaneous collectivism and disregard for the future, the same quest for pockets of autonomy in the midst of an accelerated industrialisation of life itself. Filliou notably includes The Fugs on his list of exemplary artists.⁸ But ultimately Filliou's aesthetic-pedagogical strategies are informed by his education as an economist, with formative years spent working for the United

⁶ Published both as an autonomous book and as a set of cards, under the title *Ample Food for Stupid Thought*, New York: Something Else Press, 1965.

⁷ Robert Filliou, 'Good-For-Nothing – Good-At-Everything (1962)' in *Teaching and Learning and as Performing Arts*, *op. cit.*, pp.79–80.

⁸ Robert Filliou, 'The Artistic Proposition', in *Teaching and Learning and as Performing Arts*, *op. cit.*, p.22

Nations in Korea. The unceremonious, chatty tone of his writings is suffused with ideas and concepts not only from Marxist discourse, but also from standard economic thought. Economic terminologies, furthermore, are also at the core of his displacement of the avant-garde logic of refusal inherited from Duchamp. The title of the 1968 work called *The Principle of Equivalence* evidently echoes the commodity exchange evoked in Duchamp's readymades – instances of the abstraction of labour subtending the artistic refusal of work. Thierry de Duve sees the readymade as signposts of a cultural shift in which the question of aesthetic quality – well made/badly made – is supplanted by questioning art *as such* (and with it, we might add, artistic labour). In Filliou's *Principle of Equivalence*, however, the new aesthetic dichotomy – work/not work – is perversely merged with the older concern for quality. (A sly nod, perhaps, to the nostalgic French insistence on the very special 'quality' of their mass-produced items, which supposedly distinguished them from US and Soviet merchandise.⁹) Significantly, the result of this merger is a tripartite rather than dichotomous structure, composed of the *well made*, the *badly made* and the *not made*, each visually represented by a red sock placed in a shallow wooden box mounted on the wall (in the not-made version, the box is empty). On first look, this visual/spatial arrangement seems to posit the equivalence of the interchangeable: the well made, the badly made and the not made are of equal size and shape and are equally unremarkable. Yet, subjecting the same ensemble and its tripartite logic to the exponential growth that is also the main growth tendency in capitalist economies, the impression of equivalence – actually an effect of a deft mathematical/visual illusion – soon disappears. Soon, the amount of wall space taken up by the not made far outweighs that of the well made and the badly made. Filliou calculated that, had he continued growth to the power of one hundred, the space taken up by the not made would have encircled the globe five times, but projections of such futures are obviously of no use to anyone.

This is of course exactly the point. A constantly expanding realm of the not made: this evoked a very different set of relationships than the one-off refusal of work. It exposed, rather, the ontological impossibility of searching for mastery and completion, and also – contra the classical economics of scarcity and the new but unequally distributed 'abundance' of consumer goods – the truly inexhaustible abundance of *things to do*. Equivalence, here, was not really about the exchangeable. It was the practical-pedagogical claim to equality presented by the constant, inevitable and universal process of failure in the here and now.

⁹ In *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995, p.128, Kristin Ross recounts the French quest to 'remain the nation of quality', vs. the standardisation of the industrial age.