

# Strange Teaching: The Artist as Excellent and Miserable Teacher

## **RAINER GANAHL**

From 1986 until 1991, Rainer Ganahl studied at the University of Applied Arts Vienna (Peter Weibel) and the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (Nam June Paik). He was a member of the 1990/91 Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in New York. His best known work, *S/L* (Seminars/Lectures), is an ongoing series of photographs, begun in 1995, of well-known cultural critics addressing audiences. The photographs, taken in university classrooms and lecture halls, not only show the lecturer but also the listeners

and students in the audience. In a similar way, he documented his own process of learning an "exotic" language (e. g., Basic Japanese) as an art project. In his Imported-Reading Seminars held from 1995 onward, the group-study of theoretical works from specific countries were documented on video. His latest exhibition *El Mundo* was recently listed as one of the top exhibitions of 2014 by the New York Times. Rainer Ganahl represented Austria at the 1999 Venice Biennale.

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Editors' note: We invited Rainer Ganahl to contribute a text to the first number of PARSE based on his practice as an artist and educator. Having been long aware of Ganahl's critical work on education<sup>1</sup>, and on celebrity intellectual culture<sup>2</sup>, we were especially interested to invite a contribution that could mark the intersection of questions of judgement with questions of contemporary art education. In making our invitation, we cited a recent text by Ganahl, that was published in *Brooklyn Rail*, where he asserted that:

*Education as well as any other form of cultural work – including art making - should open up possibilities for everybody to develop their own criteria of success and create their own flexible, multi-dimensional, alternative grids as frame works of viable and sustainable references in which to operate and communicate.*<sup>3</sup>

We are very pleased that our invitation was accepted, but also that the artist subsequently entered into a dialogue with us in respect of the positions rehearsed in his provocative and challenging text. We present here Ganahl's original text which has the sub-title – "the artist as excellent and miserable teacher" – written in response to our invitation, which is then followed by a series of questions exchanged between the author and the editorial team.

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1. See for example Ganahl's 1997 guest-curated show at Generali Foundation in Italy "Education Complex." URL: <http://foundation.generali.at/en/info/archive/1997-1995/exhibitions/educational-complex.html>

2. See Ganahl's S/L (Seminars/Lectures) series ongoing since 1995. URL: [http://www.ganahl.info/sl\\_description.html](http://www.ganahl.info/sl_description.html)

3. R. Ganahl. Manifesto for an Education Beyond the Power Grid. *The Brooklyn Rail*. February. 2013. URL: <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/02/artseen/manifesto-for-an-education-beyond-the-power-grid>

**WHEN I FIRST CAME** into contact with art schools, their professors and teachers, I realized quickly that they affected students differently. My first art professor was Peter Weibel. I had recently graduated with a Master's degree in philosophy and history from a regular university in Austria, where respect was gained in discussion through contributions based on knowledge and seniority. At my Viennese art school, attitude, social positioning and quasi-tribal politics ruled and respect was acquired through the proximity to professors and ruling art world VIPs. I couldn't relate to any of that. I didn't even understand their games properly. Being unable to adapt to these new art school hierarchies made me look something of an oddball to my fellow students. I soon got the impression that Weibel too perceived me in a similarly non-favorable way. All this eventually became unbearable for me. As a consequence I showed up only for the few occasions when Weibel gave a talk. But these few presentations by him, and the reading of his texts, altered my ideas about art and helped me to re-orient my interest and visual research. Weibel also let me look through *Artforum*, *Flash Art* and other current art-journals and documentation which in 1985 were not readily available in Vienna. There was no internet and libraries did not offer foreign art magazines and articles on time. He taught me not only where to find information but also why something was important and relevant and why other things were not.

Weibel's influence on my learning and understanding, despite the disharmony between us, was rather strong. This stands in contrast to the experience with my next principle art teacher, Nam June Paik at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dusseldorf. He was a love affair for anyone who encountered him. He was funny, incredibly generous, helpful and he liked us all. But I felt I didn't really learn more than that which had been already communicated through his work and all books about him. I liked him and his art works a lot but he didn't influence my perspective the way Peter Weibel had previously done. Weibel was very straightforward and people feared his opinions and judgment, something I needed at the time.

The next stop along my educational path was the Whitney Independent Study Program (ISP). Coming from Europe in 1990, I entered into an intellectual climate at the height of a paradigm shift characterized by postcolonial studies and an orientation towards popular culture. The ISP repositioned my previous knowledge with respect to these new prerogatives and perspectives, in a way that continues to mark my practice to this day. Investigating Euro-centrism and cultural arrogance, I could use myself as a good and readily available exemplar. I came to better understand myself and my biased cultural background, a process that is still ongoing, hence, I'm still unlearning. To this day, I am fundamentally marked by these educational experiences and I see or read nearly everything through these questions regarding representation and the dynamics of power. But again, it seemed that the more I learned from my teachers the less well I got along with them. There I had the honor to study with Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh, Mary Kelly, and Yvonne Rainer among others.

The reason for mentioning all these wonderfully fortunate (though they did not always end well) encounters, is simply to show that one doesn't need to get along with a teacher in order to learn something. Not to care about teachers is also consistent

with my preferred autodidactic approach to education. This all should offer an explanation and an apology as to why I tell students what I tell them, and why I am not so concerned whether they like me or not. I have had students quit because of my criticism or my disinterest. I do not think that Art School ought to be a client-oriented service station, seeking to make students feel good about themselves. The constant flux of networked *Selfies* and *Likes* can do that job better. I therefore define art education also as a clearing house that points towards the Exit door and hopes to provide immunization for people from the art virus. I have seen students' contaminated by this virus to the degree that they ended up perceiving their lives as failures even though they were highly successful in other fields or trades but never could overcome the fact they had not succeeded as artists.

### **What should art education really be since it cannot be just reduced to telling people to stop making art?**

I find it important to scare people out of this madhouse of false promises and irredeemable expectations. I welcome a negative attitude as part of an important component for any ambitious art education. In fact, I have learned most by people who trashed me when I started my way with writing and art making. Artists and poets live in a world of too much supply and only little if any demand to put it economically (and we have not yet even begun here to speak of money.) The chances for anyone in art school to come out and make a living, or to succeed critically in the art world are very, very small. Speaking for myself in the role of a teacher, I tell students they count and I try to encourage and disrupt; create obstacles and disillusion; confusion and surprises; break early-adapted formulas; facilitate the exit or transfer out of art making; offer non-sense and an insight into the miserable state of affairs; and finally push when they are about to fall.

I am perfectly aware that I am perceived as a good teacher by some, and as one who is not worth his salary by others. These two opposite perceptions don't even have to be seen as contradictory in themselves as they reflect just different degrees of interactions, expectations and demands. As mentioned earlier, I was learning the most from those people with whom I did not get along well, and those who made my life difficult. I consider it important to tell students what I think of their work, even if they end up disliking me and subsequently switch classes or even change school. I do have some cases in mind of former students who looked for a more nurturing environment and found it elsewhere, though soon after school they ended up as lost and alone with their work as before. In contrast to this approach, I propose the following manifesto for art students.

## Ad hoc Manifesto for Art Students

### ONE

Do what you want to do, no matter what it is. Have fun.

### TWO

Whatever you do, it should have something to do with yourself and with your own interests, and not with much else. There is no need to imitate professors, current art trends, anything *chic* or anything trendy.

### THREE

Learn just whatever you need to know. Don't buy into the idea of learning some or many techniques first and then going on to do your own stuff. When you need to learn something, learn it by doing. If you don't have anything to say, just don't bother trying to say it. Be happy if you have to learn in an autodidactic manner. It might be even more promising, if the stuff of your interests is not something offered in your art school. Saying this, I do not want to neglect all the great things art students can learn from regular art teachers and their work places.

### FOUR

The social environment – including the faculty and visiting artists – one encounters on a campus is the most important thing an art school offers. Embrace it fully, but there is no need to run after people ahead of you. Instead, work with the people who want to work with you and create relationships with whoever you can, independent of their standing in the hierarchic pecking order of the given context. All good things derive from you and from the students around you, but don't expect much else. Organize yourself socially.

### FIVE

Re-define success. Every work, every career looks different if it's really worth the adventure. You have to define for yourself what you want, what you can handle and what you really need. You have to decide, on your own, what success constitutes for you. Be aware of the difference between how you feel and see yourself, and how you are perceived by others. Often, artists tend to fluctuate too easily between exuberance, arrogance and depression.

### SIX

Accept anti-illusionary education. Embrace a no-future situation. As a second-hand Lacanian might formulate it, love your wounds and keep offering what you can't deliver. Education is love, love is education. Loosen up. Accept being a loser. Enjoy all the bliss.

### SEVEN – ECONOMICS

Don't depend on sales. Try to fix your economic basis otherwise. With few exceptions, artists who want to succeed always find a way to get by somehow. If not, memorize

Franz Kafka's "Hunger artist" and recite it for money or move to Leipzig for as long as it remains dirt cheap. There is always a Brooklyn of the early 1990s, a Berlin of the last fifty years and a Leipzig of the current moment. Let's all meet in Odessa soon.

#### EIGHT

Art and the reception of art is a question of time. There are a very few young artists who can cut it all short and hit some kind of jackpot at a very young age, though they may pay a price for it when prices are not sustainable and the downfall becomes graphic. The great curators, collectors, museum directors and art dealers of the future are most likely studying next to you and look all alike. It is normal to always feel voiceless, powerless, and in need of those who look like they have it all. But ignore all this nonsense.

#### FINAL MUSIC – YOU GOT THE POWER...

Power is nonsense in the sense that it doesn't exist by itself. It results from all participants in a given game, a given context. Power always shifts, travels, transforms itself and visits anyone who doesn't give up ahead of time and capitulate. Today's *Macher*, today's movers and shakers, and great artists were yesterday's students and most likely felt as irrelevant as art students usually feel when it comes to questions of success and power. There is no need to suck up to those ahead and disregard colleagues and peers who enter the circuit later. This self-defeating and unpleasant behavior is unfortunately the predominant style in the art world, and is often detectable already in art schools.

The best way to escape this trap is to organize things oneself and do it with one's peers and friends. Students really shouldn't be bothered with much else but their own practices and activities because only if they manage to connect with themselves and their own generation will they be able to take over from those ahead of them. Every generation will create their own stars and find somebody to fill the role of the curator, collector, and art dealer. Anyone may come to play a role in this vast network of whispers, opinions, and up-and-down mouthing that so much influences all these various decision-making processes that we feel so dependent upon. The wheel of generational succession will never stop turning.

#### HAPPY END

The bigger the frustrations, the boredom and ignorance with what people define as successful art, the better and easier it is to break in with better, different and more exciting art. Hence, we don't need to complain anymore. Let's just be really happy and celebrate the fact that there will always be amazing art works made. Their time will come.

*New York and Leipzig 2014*

*PS: Please, note my teaching project entitled "Strange teaching" which functions as a (no)/low cost traveling alternative to any traditional art academy: [www.strangeteaching.info](http://www.strangeteaching.info).*

# Dialogue

PARSE: This first issue of the new journal is devoted to the question of judgement. In inviting your contribution we, the editorial team, were mindful of your sustained engagement with the questions of education – especially your brilliant 1997 piece *Education Complex* and the show you curated around this also. We were also mindful of your humorous and pointed critique of celebrity-intellectual culture (public-intellectual as spectacle) in your paparazzi shots of leading intellectual figures. We were especially interested to hear your thoughts on the question of judgement within the educational complex. The text you have presented is riddled with judgements: judgements on particular educators – or at least your personal encounters with those educators; judgements on the appropriate behaviours of students and recent graduates from art school; judgement as something that the student must already have and so exercise in deciding what to make art with / about etc.

At times you insist on the necessity of the teacher producing judgement on the student's work (and the need for that judgement to be unrestricted by concerns for the possible hurt-feelings of the student or the possible unpopularity of the teacher with students, etc.). On the one hand, the need for the students' judgement suggests that judgement cannot be taught as such, on the other hand the emphasis on the teachers demonstrations of judgement suggest that the teacher does indeed teach judgement: What is your position? Should the teacher in an art education attempt to teach judgement? Can we avoid teaching judgement, as in some sense the hidden curriculum of our teaching practices, where we are always unwittingly transmitting judgement and the students are unwittingly learning judgement from us?

RG: The moment I am introduced as a teacher, students start demanding judgements and they engage in reading and deciphering all forms of giving judgements even though I might give only "comments." This is obviously a dangerous game, but people try to squeeze judgements – I keep using this term now - from any kind of reaction from me. Needless to say, I try to behave "unteacherly" because I naively (kind of) envy my students for all the fun, the misery, the desperation and releases they have in parties and irresponsible behavior that only youth, insecurity and non-engagement can justify. But yes, students demand judgements from me and I usually provide it even if I risk attracting unpleasant reactions. Only yesterday, an ex-student came by, and showed me his work though I didn't ask for it. After not commenting he lashed out on me with the passive-aggressive slur: "This is why you are a bad teacher!" I knew how much he wanted to hear from me, and how strong his reactions to my judgment always were, hence, I tried everything to avoid any conflict. I finally ended up speaking for two hours about his work and about himself, on a beautiful Berlin vacation day. The last critique I gave him in my class made him switch Art School which, of course, he also doesn't fully admit. "I needed something more nurturing and didn't leave because of you..."

In order to avoid these hypersensitive reactions, I usually introduce the framework on which my judgements have grown, and on which they have also partially degenerated. For example, I tell them because of my introduction to *A, B, and C* in the year *XX* under the social, media and political conditions of *YMY* I have come to the conclusions *TYCxcZ778CA*. Needless to say, it can get very complicated and variable.

4. The line “My uncle has got barn, we can still put on the show” and variants are apocryphal, but they indicate the basic drive of the Hollywood *Babes in Arms* series of movies from the 1930s (in part, reflexive works on the entertainment industry) and the kind of mythos of talented youngsters just getting their stuff to happen with their own immediate means and energies.

Giving you a more practical and more graphical answer, I’d like to say that I teach *judgement relativism* as a kind of *judgement constructivism* that moves along a long and meandering path of a multi-layered *judgement contingency plan*. But the real task is to hand over this responsibility to the students themselves, so that they can make their own judgment based on their own experiences, responsibilities and needs and so that they can justify their judgement reasoning according to their own logics.

Concluding, let me also say, I would never “teach judgement” but instead try to feed people with knowledge and experiences so students can start their own uphill battles for their consequential judgements. Along the way I might throw them into confusion by confronting them with as many “good and bad” (according to “my judgement”) judgements as I can. Again, I never use the word “judgement”, and don’t necessarily feel a need for it, but I am aware that any position, any comment, any “liking” or “not-liking” including any “ignoring of something” is a judgemental speech act.

PARSE: In your overall instruction to the students at Art School – to learn for themselves, to engage horizontally with peers, create their own scene – you seem to be echoing a particular mythos of “talent will out” familiar from the 1990s rhetoric about the British YBA phenomena and Hans Ulrich Obrist’s repeated story of having his first exhibition in his kitchen etc. There is a recurrence of this particular narrative of success-through-authentic-action - think of Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland,

“My uncle has got a barn, we can still put the show on”<sup>4</sup> – and the well-rehearsed stories of artist movements and groups, who are supposed to function as self-sustaining micro-cultures in marginal spaces and economies, and then get “picked up” or become celebrated by the art system through new found market exposure or through validation in museum shows or through subsequent valorization in criticism and art history etc. This story is constantly rehearsed in popular media (X Factor, America’s Got Talent, etc.), where talent will out through sustained personal conviction and authentic investment in one’s art. This narrative occludes the political economy of the various systems – Hollywood, R&D in the music industry and the construction of the music charts, the capitalization of, and speculative investment in, artistic production in the contemporary art system(s) – where the operation of, and the selectivity of, the market/fair/biennial/museum/journal system is effectively obscured. In a very summary sense, are we not thereby obscuring from the art-student the actual dynamics of the art system in favour of a kind of double-edged rationalization? By double-edged is meant that, on the one hand, there is a Darwinian logic of “survival of the most fit (to-make-art)” and, on the other hand, that any “failure” has simply been a failure to define success in one’s own terms?

RG: I do not see any contradiction in your two handed opposition: Those who seem to engage in the smartest way, will acquire the most practical, social and theoretical knowledge to prevail in whatever sense, and create their own structures, their own spaces with their

own audiences and economies. But the pendulum is now already swinging back, if we ask the question where all this strength is coming from? My answer will in most cases hint towards the detection of some intrinsic qualities, interests and *talents* – if you allow the word without me having an idea of what it could all fully imply – that are not just mindlessly Darwinian, but an inspiration for success on one’s own terms. Failure is hence not just a failure to define success but a lack of energy, social reinforcement and belief that it is worth the game, the play, the struggle, the costs, the fun. I myself simply don’t see much of a separation between the qualities of the art, and the qualities of kicking down the rotten ball – sorry, I mean art – across all these times and spaces. If you give up, you give up and need not ask who to blame.

PARSE: Your basic argument that the student should not care for the teachers’ “love” is a very provocative and a very important one. It references a very ancient theme in educational thinking about the love between “master” and “student” – going back to traditions of Greek *paideia* and so forth. Within the psychoanalytic tradition, reflection on pedagogical exchange has consistently thematised the question of “affect” and the “transferences” between student and teacher. Is it really possible for any teacher, or any student, to enter the field of affective relations and transferences between the one-presumed-to-not-know or to-want-knowing and the one-presumed-to-know without taking these flows of affect as somehow critical and definitive conditions of, and occasions of, learning in themselves? Or is your teaching a demand for the self-disciplin-

ing of affects, for professional distancing from affective entanglements?

RG: I might have given the wrong impression. It is impossible not to be affected, attracted or repulsed by any meaningful teacher-student relationship but what I would like to say is that one needs not to overemphasize the emotional and cathetic aspects of this relationship. In fact, if you want to fall in love and find reciprocity do so, and if you encounter nothing but rejection and weirdness, but still learn something, don’t leave. I am certainly the last person to encourage affective distancing – quite the opposite, I feel that we are all family: As in the song, “*love is all we need*” and I would complement that with the need also for beauty and knowledge based on our interests, desires and politics.

PARSE: Can you talk a little bit more about “Strange teaching”: [www.strangeteaching.info](http://www.strangeteaching.info). We wondered if this might also be understood as a kind of corrective research project – an enquiry into alternate models of educational practice, embedded within the terms of art practice, rather than “about” art practice?

RG: The *strange teaching* Leipzig project (and there should be a Bushwick, NYC version in 2015) is certainly both – art practice and “about” art practice – depending on how you read and perceive it, and depending on who is engaged in it. In Leipzig, it fulfilled different tasks and opportunities for lecturers, performers, students, visitors and guests. The special characteristics of this experiment consisted in the openness of the format and its results, as well as

5. The reference here is to *Survivor*, a franchised reality TV game show, that has been produced in many countries throughout the world. In the show, contestants are isolated (sometimes on an island) and compete for cash and other prizes. The show uses a system of progressive elimination, allowing the contestants to vote off other tribe members until only one final contestant remains and wins the game.

in the instability of its model and the fragility of its success. Leipzig's former Held department store was an illegal semi-squatted, uninhabitable, uninviting, dirty space with no heating, no electricity, no clean water, where people lived, worked, performed and showed work for the duration of two weeks. It was a semi-secret extravaganza with daily events, teach-ins and performances that excited everybody and resulted in a show, an on-line presence, Instagram video clips and Twitter feeds, a publication (currently in production) and a good portion of myth; not to mention the beautiful images and memories that people hopefully have, as I do, of the project,

The remarkable thing about Leipzig consisted in getting many interesting people involved who all came without any budget. In that respect, the next iteration in New York City should even add to the fun and excitement. Also the contrast to the city's regular fine art education economics might be as dazzling as the potential access to the unlimited pool of mind-staggering talent in New York. Again, the curatorial and selective mode will be simply the invitations I extend to artist friends who in return invite their students. In Leipzig, programming was enriched by spontaneously inviting people from nearby Berlin. With a certain critical mass and buzz, people were pleased by these *autopoietic* activities.

Given the fun it all was, I have now become even more interested to organize, stage, host and share opportunities with a 'Just-do-it' attitude, without letting myself be scared by today's planning hustles or costs. I admit, from a contemporary, well-sanitized and regulated perspective, *strange teaching* was irresponsible, illegal, and even potentially hazardous as you cannot invite one hundred people into an unprepared, shut down ruin and just say "just do it": But that is exactly what I did, rejecting even any personal, or institutional, responsibility. It was, for sure, a daring experiment and one that was worth taking. Bushwick today is not Leipzig, but Bushwick will also have some of its own interesting challenges that I will need to overcome.

Of course, Leipzig was not an artificially staged *Survivor Island* reality show<sup>5</sup> but the result of a no budget situation and some lucky circumstances as this former defunct department store became somehow generative. New York will be staged in a more organized environment, since everything is productive and regulated in this high cost living and working area where no spaces are left alone for long without being used for profit. I believe in people and their intrinsic interest in exchange, curiosity, love and need for communication and lived-through-and-told stories.