



MASTERS AND SERVANT

Becket Flannery

THE ENEMY / Issue Three
theenemyreader.org

“...if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a ‘totally administered society,’ or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can’t get outside ourselves.” -Andrea Fraser¹

If, as Andrea Fraser suggests, art is a discursive production, and “we” are the primary site of its fabrication, distribution, and reception, then it is fairly clear that the institution *par excellence* is the MFA program. Although only mentioned briefly in her essay, graduate art programs are the only institutions that expressly attempt to articulate what artists think of as art, what artists think about art, and how they think about it. This is their singular function, to produce the “we” to whom Fraser refers. Ultimately the product of a school is the mind of a student; it is the institution actually devoted to producing the institution.

I wanted to start with this somewhat basic idea because I find that a lot of discussions about MFA programs tend to think of them very differently. Whether in chat forums, print and online magazines, or discussions after graduate school info sessions, the question is often framed with the student as the consumer and the school as a very expensive and possibly valueless product. No small amount of ink and bandwidth is devoted to debating the cost of an MFA versus its perceived benefits. Masters programs do cost too much, and student debt is an important question. Every student needs to individually evaluate whether it is worth taking on possibly crushing amounts of debt. Nonetheless, I don’t believe that most students think of it as an economic decision, and I think they’re probably right not to; without considering the role of schools in reproducing the field of art, the “choice” of whether to go or not will have no broader significance.

The choice to go or not is of course always the student’s, but after all the calculations of a program’s value, most retain a lingering feeling that an MFA is something she must have. The necessity of school to the field of art is transferred onto the student as the necessity of the degree. Seen from a wider perspective there is effectively no choice, no matter how much debt students must accept.²

Rather than contrasting neoliberal education with a rosy rendering of artistic autonomy, I want to suggest that the student herself is both where institutions exert control and where the invisible institution, the field of art, is reproduced. If institutionality is something to be laid bare it should be exposed in the task it assumes for itself – the intangible formation of a subject able to “recognize” art or identify as an artist. “Control over the body,” as Franco Berardi more recently has written, “is exerted by the modeling of the soul.”³ The centrality of the soul to the functioning of institutions, to their very reproduction, should indicate that it is subjectivity that registers institutional pressure, and also serves as the site of resistance to it.

The special role that graduate art education fulfills is inseparable from the role of education *per se*. Despite being born as humans, children need decades of training to become human, to function in a human society. This supplement, this bridge between having a human nature and becoming a human subject, we could call education. As Jean-Francois Lyotard put it,

“If humans are born human, as cats are born cats (within a few hours), it would not be ... possible, to educate them. That children have to be educated is a circumstance which only proceeds from the fact that they are not completely led by nature, not programmed. The institutions which constitute culture supplement this native lack.”⁴

Education is the broad term for this process of becoming a human subject. It’s not something that happens exclusively in schools, just as an MFA program isn’t only something that happens in studio crits. Nor are schools the only institutions that perform this function, but that is their actual purpose, unlike museums or galleries.

This puts the mental and emotional state of students very much on the table. The premise of the MFA being a kind of “self-realization,” there is an implicit demand that each student provide faculty, visiting artists, and their fellow students with full access to their psychic resources. At the very least, students must adapt to this by balancing openness and self-preservation, often instinctively. The simple demand to constantly make work, the repeated marshalling of the desire that is necessary to produce and repeatedly discuss each piece, is taxing enough. And yet, resisting this imperative is typically read as pathological. To be unable to desire, or to resist desire, is melancholy; and to keep drawing on one’s mental reserves to the point of exhaustion produces depression. The soul at work, indeed.⁵

Education always has a form of subjection in mind. For the MFA let’s call this subject a swimmer. It’s dangerous to name it like that, to suggest it’s something so concrete,

so easy to avoid, but it’s not a question of whether to swim; we’ve already chosen to swim. Resistance seems like the wrong word entirely; it feels more like a delay, to stave it off long enough to let something else happen first, to smuggle something out before letting in the water. There’s some failure inherent in this, a hesitancy regarding development, a footrace in reverse to see how far you can lag behind and still finish.⁶

As an MFA student, I felt the touch of these processes of subjecthood, neither out of my control nor a fully conscious process. I learned a lot about institutions this way, the way you might learn about a dental tool as it scrapes around your mouth, by haptic instruction. Dentists, or university administrators, in the age of creative destruction are not always “institution building,” at least in the traditional sense. Their role can be just as much to burn a program as to build it, for any number of reasons. Perhaps there is a desire to shift funding, or to change personnel to reflect a new ideological orientation. Whatever the nature of these changes, however, students often have their education defined for them as somehow mutually exclusive with the actions of the administration. Education is not about funding cuts, exploited adjunct faculty, or undergraduate curriculum, so it is of no concern to graduate students, who are, it is implied, unqualified to debate the cuts to their funding, the treatment of their professors, and the way the classes they TA are structured. Innumerable wheels and whirligigs are spinning beyond our limited perspective. The job of the dentist is to deal with those things; the patient must hold still or she’ll muck everything up.

“Perspective” is thus what the students are told they lack; and unlike ignorance (the lack that frames them as students to be taught), perspective is not something they are expected or allowed to attain. Universities uphold the

very fallacy that Fraser tried to dispel, that the functioning of power and education lie on opposite sides of administration and never meet, that institution building and soul forming are separated by a firewall of know-betters.

As my classmates and I began to have conflicts with our school, our response reflexively tied these aspects together. Yes, we have no perspective, just our own. No, we don't care about running an institution, but about the institution running around inside us. We required a subjectivity of our own, a truly institutional soul, and the soul of an institution, which we called Collective Dean.

Created and sustained by the MFA students during her two year lifespan, Collective Dean (CD) began when the actual Dean of the art school abruptly took leave after two years of contentious relations with faculty, students, and staff. Beginning simply as a name, but one with its own amorphous demands, CD didn't have any specific purpose, except that by being named it somehow needed to exist; and it should live up to this name, which somehow suggested both an ideal Dean and an indictment of the notion of Deanship itself.

One of our first projects as CD was a video extolling her vast resumé. The ten-minute monologue is a compendium of actual work experience, righteous fantasy, and stultifying credentials. The video was shot on green screen, allowing anyone to submit images or footage to play behind her as she talks, including snippets of Riefenstahl's *Olympia*, balloon fetish videos, and promotional clips for the University football team. CD is dressed in a shiny pink blouse with ascot poking out, spectacles slung low on her nose. Interspersed between bullet points on her *curriculum vitae*, she insists she's "not

trying to impress you," but the scent of insecurity never fades, especially as the litany of accomplishments grinds on. When speaking with authority, she takes on its defining traits, a preening caprice interrupted by patronizing self-seriousness.

Collective Dean never had any pre-established goal nor a defined, ideological purpose. Her statements, videos, artworks, and representations were *ad hoc*. Our structure was loose and suited to each challenge at hand. Her actions were always, therefore, immediately responsive to our actual situation as students. While conflicts between students and art schools were ever thus, the pressure at a neoliberal university to increase enrollment and tuition while cutting budgets tied the identity of the student artist to that of the debtor-entrepreneur. What I did not expect was that, in this situation, many of our conflicts with the university centered around art's *autonomy*. In this context, the language of engaged art is used as ideological cover; when "interdisciplinary" becomes a code word for exploring new markets, and "participation" is measured by distribution and consumption, something has gone horribly wrong.

We pursued many projects under the loose heading of Collective Dean. At times conceived of as a bearded lady, at others as a cannibalistically devoured totemic body, it was always assumed that CD never had an official form; she was always transparently an avatar, a shield for collective demands, a label for collaborative wishing. The entire point was the production of avatars, unofficial, bootleg, something you could get behind, and get rid of, part Subcommandante Marcos, and part Ubu Roi.

It felt important that no avatar become permanent, even CD herself, in case she became just another imperative

of art school, another identity to be sustained in addition to your own. Having decided to die, Collective Dean committed seppuku on web-streaming television at the Hammer Museum. Asked to be a contestant on Keith Knittel's game show "Everything Must Go," CD eliminated herself from competition during the "talent" portion of the contest, reading a prepared statement and plunging a dagger into her abdomen. Stage blood streamed out of her, staining her tan blazer and the carpeted floor of the makeshift TV studio in the museum lobby. Her suicide complete, Collective Dean rose, undead, to wander the Hammer Museum like a zombie Andrea Fraser. Her blood stained blouse was an awkward impoliteness, but with self-possessed confidence, she strode its halls like a skirt suited colossus. Mere days from finishing her coursework, her tombstone might read, "She failed all her subjects. She was a failed subject."

The death of Collective Dean was a fitting end to her career, marked not so much by rising up the administrative ladder as a series of opportunistic failures. By failure, I mean she refused to take the "40,000 foot view" of institutional authority, no matter how much she was exhorted to – she was *irresponsible*, impossible to hold accountable. At the heart of the university is the trap of individuation, the student as consumer, debtor, and entrepreneur, a logic replicated both by those who would ask us to refuse education because of the cost, and those who tell us tales about investing in human capital. Addressed as individuals, we replied together. Asked to see things as a Dean, we invented one instead, one whose "talent," tellingly, was to self-eliminate from the game, to be the first among failures.

Endnotes

1. Andrea Fraser, "From Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum*, (vol. 44, no. 1, September 2005).
2. A question that frequently arises in a lot of writing about MFA programs is whether their value is at all "educational," meaning the specifics of faculty time, crits, classes, etc, rather than simply a form of gatekeeping, or pedigree. If by education we mean this process of forming subjects with an ingrained sensibility for the field of art then it is true that the curricular aspects are just armatures for this intangible process, which isn't so much extra-curricular as a spectral curriculum, somehow beside the explicit educational structures. The field of art is structured by this act of recognition, a form of acknowledgement based on an almost instinctual knowledge of what constitutes contemporary art. However, this is not thereby less "educational" in our sense, though it may fall short of pedagogical standards, because it is a sensibility created by the density of an MFA program.
3. Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), p. 200.
4. J-F. Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 3.
5. Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), pp. 75-105.
6. Stephano Harney and Fred Moten write that we fail to become proper subjects by "allowing subjectivity to be unlawfully overcome by others, a radical passion and passivity such that one becomes unfit for subjection, because one does not possess the kind of agency that can hold the regulatory forces of subjecthood." *The Undercommons*, (New York: Autonomedia, 2013), p. 28.