Education in the Present Tense

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The attempt to grasp the present as a general *condition*, that is, to understand the historical specificity of today and transform that understanding into *timely* actions within the present, lies in the heart of modernity. When the world is formed by us (and not through divine inter ventions), the present becomes a moment of action: if we want to take our destiny in our own hands, we must act *now* rather than *later*. As a *condition*, the present is inherently contingent: it is a place of contestation where not only different realities coincide, but also where the ten sion between the past and the future is manifested. This is what Hannah Arendt (1961) had in mind when she gave her "six exercises in political thought" the title *Between Past and Future.* Instead of joining tradition and telos (that is, sustaining a continuity between the past to the future), the present presents itself, for Arendt, as a *gap*. Since the attempts to close this gap easily evoke problems (like fascist restorations of a Golden Age), Arendt's task was to write about "how to move in this gap–the only region perhaps where truth eventually will appear"(Arendt 1961: 14). Arendt's book was published 56 years ago, but the question she poses, that is, how to live in the gap between the past and the future, seems still extremely relevant: not only because we are currently experiencing similar totalitarian tendencies that Arendt closely examined in her writings, but also because the *gap-ness* of the present remains as the general rule of life, work, and education today. In an innovation-driven economy, we are constantly waiting for the next big thing (the new Nokia, possibly a two-year grant, a possible shout-out in someone's Instagram page): not because it redeems the present and stabilizes its tensions (e.g. chiliastic waiting for the Second Coming of Christ), but because it ensures that we can make it through the day; that if things are not working out today, we can always try to reinvent ourselves tomorrow; that we can seize the moment only for a moment as easily as we can take an Uber from the gallery to the nightclub.
It is within this gap that I wish to talk about the post-internet, art, and education. The condition it points to, that is, a moment in time when the circulation of information, capital, and affects is increasingly linked to what we call the Internet (a term that is somewhat unnecessary today, since the Internet seems to be *everywhere*), unfolds a present clearly distinguished from the past (e.g. analogue vs. digital; offline vs. online) without, however, clearly defining what kind of future will this present bring with itself (like all ‚post'-definitions: poststructuralism, postmodernity, post-politics; they all seem to leave us in an unnerving *end* of an era). To give this moment an epochal definition is to assign the wide-spread introduction of the Internet the status of a social, cultural, and economic change akin to telegraph, radio, and TV: that the present is an after-effect of a *technological* event that profoundly shaped human activities and cultures. Without going deeper into the intricacies of such claims (indeed, who's epochs, technologies, and cultures are we talking about?), my attempt is to think what kind of *tem poral* (not just technological) conditions does the post-internet (or whatever we want to call it) assign to art and education today. Taking a cue from Arendt's passage above, that the gap between the past and the future is perhaps the "only region […] where truth eventually will appear" (ebd.: 14), I'm interested in how art and education could act in the present and partake in the poetics of its truth.

Let's take, as our example, Ryan Trecartin's *Center Jenny* (2013). When I first saw Trecartin's videos, I thought of Paul McCarthy's video pieces (like *The Painter* [1995]) that present us with repetitive and extreme situations of camouflage, abject, and the everyday. However, while for McCarthy it is his own body that serves as the primary medium of artistic practice – meaning that the camera merely captures these situations – Trecartin (often together with his close collaborator Lizzie Fitch) focuses on the very process of capturing, or better, he mobilizes different paces and places of the digital moving image and its circulation through identities, gestures, and styles. This means that the form and content coincide in his work to the point where *everything* seems to become digital: digital in a sense that characters, actions, and situations are intimately linked with the computational technologies that present their order, appearance, and causality. But this digitalization is not total: the image is still there, vis ible, not rendered into mere digits. This is why I would not like to reduce this computational logic of the digital to a single code or coder, or to go as far as those who seriously believe in the so-called simulation argument; that our world itself is merely a simulation programmed by some other lifeform. Rather, as a cultural, political, and economical *condition*, I see that the digital landscape of the present – one that Trecartin and Fitch draw from – involves sensibili ties that assign a specific kind of contingency to the present: one where the movement within the gap between the past and the future denotes a fluctuating movement between offline--time/ presence and online-time/presence; a contingency that is not reducible either to digits (i.e. contingency of the code or the coder) or the social in its traditional sense (i.e. the contingency of the social contract). Going back to what I started with – that the present is the primary moment of *action* in modernity – such digital landscape does not undo or change this logic but *intensifies* it:

it is immediate activity in the now that confirms the immediacy of the present (that's why, perhaps, people are so eager to use the hashtag *latergram* when they post images that are nonsynchronous with the now). Here, when I say *intensification*, I do not mean *acceleration*. Intensification denotes something what could be illustrated through Snapchat. With Snapchat, the photographic moment has become, yet again, a miraculous moment: not because we can freeze time (i.e. *capture the present*), but because we can synchronize ourselves with a tech?nology that produces the present. *Center Jenny* presents us with a collection of Jennies, who, instead of representing individual characters, are presented as collections of words, postures, voices, and looks: they are, to put it differently, performances that the overlapping gazes of multiple cameras trigger to act. The narrative takes place somewhere in the future where humans have gone extinct: all beings and objects we see are simulations of this extinct, once-organic life and culture; simulations that run and perfect themselves by infinitely repeating their patterns (for the proponents of the sim?ulation argument, this is the true condition of our reality today). Here, we could go to Samuel Delany's queer science-fiction or Lee Edelman's and José Esteban Muñoz's contesting but complementary writings on queer futurities as possible frameworks to discuss Trecartin's image of the future. However, for the sake of my argument, let's stick with the present. In *Center Jenny*, everything happens in interconnected and repeated loops of activity. It is im?portant to note that this activity does not simply refer to individual characters, but to the very milieu in which these characters act. As Trecartin himself put it in an interview,

"We [Trecartin and Fitch] started focusing more on context as being the main charac?ter of the movie, rather than on individual personalities. And we used different charac?ters and their behaviors as tools and utensils for the free will of the context rather than of the individual" (Lehrer-Graiwer 2016, para 47).

This shift of focus from the individual free will to the free will of the context echoes, I believe, the sensibilities I discussed earlier: that the contingency of the present is not solely in the hands of people (offline) or technology (online), but forms through the interplay between different actors (human, non-human, artificial…) and the different temporalities of their actions (move?ment, repetition, frames/kilobytes second). Simultaneously offline and online, the present be?comes a moment of action where it is not clear whether the effects of these actions are virtual or real or both or neither. In order to mobilize this indeterminacy (to move *in* it rather than *with* it), it becomes crucial to explore not only the material conditions of our actions (e.g. online or offline), but also what kind of *times* do these actions occupy. After all, the capitalization of technological time runs precisely by dividing and organizing our offline activities into separate moments online; moments that form the basis for the authorship of individualized lives today (a vanishing Snapchat story and a vanishing Uber contract are basically the same thing). What is needed, then, is an articulation of the present that is not, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, like a bead in a rosary, but rather a conflation of different times, both online and offline. What *Center Jenny* could teach us, then, is how time in the contemporary could present itself in the gap between offline and online, between the past and the future: multiplied yet centralized, organic yet computed, bodily yet digital. This could be one of the lessons of art after the internet: the poetics of the present is not that much of a world-making but time-dwelling.

So, how does this relate to art education? The history of public education in modernity is concomitant with the understanding of the present as a moment of action. After all, education, it is believed, should prepare students to function in the society by adapting to the present and offer them the means to govern or change it for the sake of the future. Education, in other words, ought to be *timely*: it has to respond to the needs of the present in order to affect the future. The role of art in this logic has traditionally been complementary: whether art is seen as means of self-expression or social reconstruction, art inserts education more comprehen?sively in the present. This, however, means that art education *acts* in the present in a fully affirmative way. It turns learning into a vanishing mediator between the past and the future: a moment of action that constantly undoes itself to keep up with a linear progression of time. This is what grounds the current tyranny of lifelong learning: education, like work, becomes indistinguishable from our existence.

The poetics of the present described above offers a different relation to the present. By in?tensifying the present as a gap between offline and online, it might allow us to understand education as something takes place in a present tense: as the kind of movement that Arendt was after. After all, such movement points to the very event of education: to the relation be?tween learning and unlearning, to the articulation of the otherwise that the present already is. For art educators, such poetics of the present could help to question what constitutes a timely action and how do we act in the present. Instead of conflating offline and online (like Uber or Tinder; or, in art education, merely replacing paper with tablets), we could try to see what it would mean to keep them in tension (like Trecartin) and what does this tension mean for our understanding of the present.

To summarize, in order to explore art and education as poetics of the present after the internet, we should ask ourselves, how do

we understand them as *activities* in the now. In *Human Con□dition* (1958/1998), Arendt wrote, “To act, in its most general sense, means to take initiative, to begin, … to set something in motion” (Arendt 1998: 177). Following her, I believe that art and education (both together and separately) can set something in *motion*; in different speeds, simultaneously. This requires an attention to the variety of temporalities they can take up, both online and offline. I do understand that my suggestion to keep the offline and online in tension sustains a binary-relation between these two realms, eventually preventing us from exploring the very condition of possibility of this binary. However, let’s leave that question to some other time, to a future to come.[1]

Anmerkung

[1] Dieser Text erschien erstmals in: Tervo, Juuso (2017): Education in the Present Tense. Paper presented at Dank Contemporaneities: One-Day Symposium on the Post-Internet. Online: https://hcommons.org/deposits/objects/hc:16212/datastreams/CONTENT/content [17.03.19]

Literatur

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