INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE AS EMBODIED CRITIQUE

Notes on Self-Organized Seminar, Debt, and Collective Resistance

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I’m going to discuss a project called *Self-Organized Seminar*, a project that I was involved in with about five to seven other graduate students during my time at graduate school between 2011-2013. We wanted to problematize the professionalization of the art degree, labor in the neoliberal university, and find ways way of generating a collective practice in a atomizing environment.

To understand this project, it is important to first talk about the context out of which it was born. The organizers of this conference asked me to consider of how location influenced the project. In order to do this, I must must consider the *where* and *when* together.

With regards to the when, SOS began August 2011, which is to say SOS began in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent uprisings all over the world. 2011 saw anti-austerity resistance in Greece, Spain, England and of course the Arab Spring brought revolutions to Tunisia, Egypt Libya, and Syria. We also had a glimpse of domestic struggles just next door in Wisconsin, which many of us visiting and participated in. As you know most of these struggles emerged out of the global financial crisis of 2008.

The project took place the the University of Iowa in Iowa City. An large public university in a small city of 164,000 and about a 3.5 hour drive to Chicago. On the top left you’ll see our Studio Arts building, which was a converted Menards building, a multi-year makeshift solution after a flood in 2008 ruined a brand new multi-million dollar art building. There is a lot to say about the complexity of Iowa City, but the important point to make for today is to say that *Self-Organized Seminar* was rooted in our relationship to the university and its problems as a neoliberal university.
This included the surprising explosion of the Occupy movement in 2011. Above is an image from Occupy Iowa City which several of us were heavily involved.

Before I discuss Self-Organized Seminar, I would like to offer some insights into the debt economy from Italian Marxist Maurizio Lazzarato. *The Making of an Indebted Man* and *Governing by Debt*, published in 2012 and 2015, respectively, are a particularly useful reflection on the ways in which debt acts to mold subjects of capitalism.

Lazzarato describes credit as “one of he most effective instruments of exploitation man has managed to create, since certain people, by producing credit, are able to appropriate labor and wealth of others.’ What the media calls ‘speculation’ represents a machine for capturing and preying on surplus value in conditions created by modern day capitalist accumulations in which it is impossible to distinguish rent from profit.” (2012, 20-21).

This “capture” works on the whole of society as an instrument of macroeconomic prescription and management, a mechanism for upward income redistribution (2012, 71). The dubious aspect of the debt economy is that capitalists have found a way to usurp 1.2 trillion euros in public debt since 1974 and (2012, 19); in as of 2012 student debt in the US was over $904 billion (2015, 65). Worse, the debt economy creates a “morality” that structures social organization. On the one hand, the asymmetry of power inherent in this massive theft from the public presupposes any possibility of equality—one cannot be equal if one is indebted. One the other hand, the debt economy goes to work on the subjectivity of its indebted. The “promise” made by the debtor in the contract of the debt acts as a moral obligation to repay. Seen from a structural point of view, then, this promise becomes a commodity in itself by committing time to the reproduction of the creditor-debtor relation in the future (2012, 34-5).

This points to the temporality to the debt economy since finance is a formidable instrument for controlling possibilities for action. “The question of time, of duration, is at the heart of debt. Not only labor time or ‘life time,’ but also time as possibility, as future. Debt bridges the present and the future, it anticipates and preempts the future. The debtor mortgages at once their behavior, wages, and future income” (2015, 70). This is exactly our present situation. “The logic of debt is stifling our possibilities of action” (2012, 71).

Where do students fit into all this? Three years before Occupy Wall Street, some of the most exciting and vibrant anti-capitalist social movements would emerge as student struggles.

There was massive resistance to this structural neoliberal theft in the form of required credit for education. I was particularly aware of resistance in Europe and in the US, which responded to the austerity measures and tuition hikes with incredible analysis and courage. These are the kinds of images and activist histories I was researching in 2010 as I was entered graduate school.

In the image below, on the left is the a student that is part of the Book Bloc. This image is from the UK in 2010 as part of protests against imposed fees in the UK universities. Book blocs have emerged all over the world and began in Italy in 2008. The idea is to create shields to protect oneself
from confrontations with the police and adorn the face of the shield with your favorite book cover. Finally some theory we could get behind! This image is from the student protests against imposed fees in the UK in 2010.

On the right is a well known image from the “battle of Oak Street” between the cops and the Oakland Commune aka Occupy Oakland in January 28, 2012. Here what you see are dozens of anarchists prepared for a militarized police response. The police are blocking the activists from taking over an abandoned convention center to utilize it as a non-capitalist space. The image is humorous but the confrontation was not, as dozens of activists were hit with gas and rubber bullets. Although this was not specifically a student protest, what I love about this image is probably clear: this is an [no] armchair revolutionary!

Both of these images presented a challenge to consider how the relationship between the production of knowledge, and by extension art making, could be used for struggle and exist outside of the university and its disciplines.

In 2009 the UC system experienced an explosion of Occupations and student resistance after they raised tuition an astonishing 32% in a single year. Occupations and protests occurred at Berkeley, Davis, Santa Cruz, San Francisco. What you see here are students barricading the door of Wheeler Hall on the campus of UC Berkeley.

The most poignant and exciting piece of writing that emerged from the student struggles was a pamphlet called “Communique from an Absent Future: on the Terminus on Student Life” written by an anonymous collective that went by Research and Destroy in California. I would like to share with you a long excerpt of this pamphlet and ask that us here at this symposium consider how we, as critical artists and cultural producers, might reflect on these words as well as be reflected in them. These paragraphs would preoccupy my thinking for most of graduate school.
Here are some excerpts:

Meanwhile the graduate students, supposedly the most politically enlightened among us, are also the most obedient. The “vocation” for which they labor is nothing other than a fantasy of falling off the grid, or out of the labor market. Every grad student is a would be Robinson Crusoe, dreaming of an island economy subtracted from the exigencies of the market. But this fantasy is itself sustained through an unremitting submission to the market. There is no longer the least felt contradiction in teaching a totalizing critique of capitalism by day and polishing one’s job talk by night. That our pleasure is our labor only makes our symptoms more manageable. Aesthetics and politics collapse courtesy of the substitution of ideology for history: booze and beaux arts and another seminar on the question of being, the steady blur of typeface, each pixel paid for by somebody somewhere, some not-me, not-here, where all that appears is good and all goods appear attainable by credit. [...]  

Graduate school is simply the faded remnant of a feudal system adapted to the logic of capitalism—from the commanding heights of the star professors to the serried ranks of teaching assistants and adjuncts paid mostly in bad faith. A kind of monasticism predominates here, with all the Gothic rituals of a Benedictine abbey, and all the strange theological claims for the nobility of this work, its essential altruism. The underlings are only too happy to play apprentice to the masters, unable to do the math indicating that nine-tenths of us will teach 4 courses every semester to pad the paychecks of the one-tenth who sustain the fiction that we can all be the one. Of course I will be the star, I will get the tenure-track job in a large city and move into a newly gentrified neighborhood.  

We end up interpreting Marx’s 11th thesis on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” At best, we learn the phoenix-like skill of coming to the very limits of critique and perishing there, only to begin again at the seemingly ineradicable root. We admire the first part of this performance: it lights our way. But we want the tools to break through that point of suicidal thought, its hinge in practice.  

The same people who practice “critique” are also the most susceptible to cynicism. But if cynicism is simply the inverted form of enthusiasm, then beneath every frustrated leftist academic is a latent radical. The shoulder shrug, the dulled face, the squirm of embarrassment when discussing the fact that the US murdered a million Iraqis between 2003 and 2006, that every last dime squeezed from America’s poorest citizens is fed to the banking industry, that the seas will rise, billions will die and there’s nothing we can do about it—this discomfited posture comes from feeling oneself pulled between the is and the ought of current left thought. One feels that there is no alternative, and yet, on the other hand, that another world is possible.  

We will not be so petulant. The synthesis of these positions is right in front of us: another world is not possible; it is necessary. The ought and the is are one. The collapse of the global economy is here and now.  

So, all of this was the context of how I entered graduate school. I was trying to make sense of the financial crisis and its subsequent effects on the precarious, the debt economy, the various uprisings around the world, and a critique of the neoliberal university. It was a lot to try and respond too, but as I entered graduate school in 2010 I would try to remain mindful of my own professionalization and my implication in the reproduction of the artworld by, so much as possible, refusing to participate in it.  

This is how I arrived at the two projects Content Strike and, with many others, Self-Organized Seminar that are two sides of the same coin.  

The first project as part of the series of works under Content Strike is entitled Content Strike: Critique, a 45-minute film made entirely of blank white screen with the exception of the 10 seconds of CONTENT
STRIKE you see here. The length of 45 minutes is deliberate, marking the duration of an MFA critique. In effect, it was an attempt to “occupy” the space of critique.

My interest was to push the conversation of the critique: Why would one “refuse” space of critique? Of course, it was not really a refusal. After all, I still made something, I still showed up. I saw this as a double-movement — to occupy and/or evacuate. This became a recurring theme and would help me consider what a contemporary critical practice might look like. How does one push back while simultaneously twisting away? How can refusal be a productive force? I would continue to refuse to provide content for critique for the entirety of a year in graduate school, always pointing to work outside the space.

The above image is probably the most illustrative piece I’ve made under the Content Strike banner. This drawing shows a tally of hours it took me to read Marx’s Capital.

For me, this drawing suggests one might use Marx elsewhere. How might one deploy labor of study outside of art? The drawing also insists on the labor involved in the creation of artwork, something that supports the reproduction of capitalism. These are lessons I’ve taken from histories of Institutional Critique.

Here are a few projects that are particularly useful here, to help us think about the space and production of art and its relationship to work.

In 1974 Michael Asher removed wall at the Claire Copley gallery, revealing administrative laborer that supports art. In doing so, he also points to what that conditions that make the art space possible.

In 1968 Daniel Buren forecloses the space of art by sealing the door of the gallery, thereby forcing spectators outside the space of art.
Mierle Laderman Ukeles transports the reproductive labor of the museum into public view by scrubbing the steps of the museum in Hartford, simultaneously bringing the gendered nature of reproductive work into focus.

Ukeles connects to the insights of Italian Marxists Feminists Mariosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, and Silvia Federici. These theorists have shown how reproductive labor outside factory, or caring labor in the domestic sphere typically done by women, reproduces capitalist subjects. The poster above by Red Women’s Workshop is particularly illustrative, entitled “Capitalism Also depends on Domestic Labor,” showing women literally performing reproductive labor of the worker.

The critique offered by the Dalla Costa, James, and Federici is perhaps best demonstrated by the Wages for Housework campaign and the essential writings of Silvia Federici. In studying this feminist critique that highlights the reproduction of capitalist workers, one is tempted to ask: can we also look at the teaching, studying, and making of art works a kind of reproductive labor?

Yes! A marxist student collective, that we now know involved the great marxist theorist George Caffentzis, has already done this for us with the pamphlet entitled “Wages for Students” written in 1975. “Wages for Students” not only recognized that the university serves as training for the working class, and thus demanded a wage for that work, but also recognized liberation cannot come through the disciplined university. In reflecting on the pamphlet, Caffentzis states: “I had a critique of the Left at the time, which viewed universities as a vehicle by which liberation can occur. They posed the university factory as a place of liberation, whereas we were arguing that it was time to detach ourselves from these factories and begin to say ’no’ to them” (2016, 38-9).

It really comes down to this, as Silvia Federici summarizes the point: “We began to realize we could either reproduce people for the struggle or reproduce them for the labor market.” Self-organized Seminar
very much identifies with this line of thought, and took seriously how we might reproduce a collective practice that began to say “no” to the professionalizing imposition of the debt-economy.

Where Content Strike performed its refusal of the institutional space, Self-Organized Seminar was more concerned with learning to produce a collaborative and artistic practice that would not reproduce capitalist valorization but instead knowledge useful to struggle. At the most basic level, it was a collaboration with me about seven other graduate students, including printmakers, filmmakers, sculptors, and writers.

We usually met weekly to read critical theory and support one another’s individual and collective work. We cooked together, we critiqued each other’s work. We did this as students but outside the classroom—this allows us to think collectively and to co-produce our research.

In 2013 I wrote a short piece with collaborator Christopher Pickett in the midst of working on the project. We called it short piece of writing “What We can Do Together,” this piece perhaps can explain how we were thinking about the project at the time more eloquently than I can do retroactively:

We are writing as graduate students, as relative amateurs but also as those who continue to take steps toward being “insiders” or “professionals” in our field—fine arts. We think it is important to state this because it makes evident what is perhaps already clear that, as artists, it is in this movement toward professionalization that we are pried apart from one another. For us it takes the form of our collectivity being relegated to intersections and offerings of support in critique sessions, but our ability to commit to one another as collaborators, as anti-capitalists, as activists, or artists—feels almost impossible, even in the sheltered space of graduate school. The other reason we draw attention to our status as grad students is to reinforce that the accumulation of debt has direct connections to our inability to participate in political and non-lucrative discussions and practices.

Our response to the isolated and alienated feeling of graduate school feels intuitive and not terribly complicated: to build affinities across geography, scale, and practices. We do this by starting where we are, with our neighbors, by establishing friendships, collaborations and committing to one another. If this is revelatory it is only in the fact that developing models for intimacy seems to us a necessary political gesture. We’ve looked to what Colectivo Situaciones identify as love in militant research—“...a love relation participates without the mediation of an intellectual decision: rather, the existence of two or more finds itself pierced by this shared experience. This is not an illusion, but an authentic experience of anti-utilitarianism, which converts the ‘own’ into the ‘common.’ ” Through gestures of love in this fashion we might begin to understand the terms “occupy and/or evacuate,” that is, the double-movement of withdrawing from capitalist relations while developing spaces of counter-power that strengthen our already established relationships, as well as help us build new ones.

From our perspective we only see a possibility of withdrawing as much as possible from the individualizing forces that pry us apart. It will cost us time, money, professional accolades and a variety of other unforeseen consequences. The real challenge will be establishing much greater support networks which
allow for the more precarious to participate. As graduate students we’ve begun this at a local level with friends in basic ways, by beginning to make time for one another, through reading together and developing a common vocabulary, a support network, and a common desire to try and articulate a new way of working together. It is simple and not enough, but perhaps a step in the right direction.

Above are a few of the things we were reading. We came up with our readings collectively. We were all interested in critical theory but often very diverse as you can see. While some of us were interested in economics others were interested in ecology. We understood these were all connected if we oriented ourselves from a starting critique of capitalism, which we insisted on. In doing this, we created the space where we read these diverse texts and attempt to learn to speak between them. But it was also a supportive act: each of us were interested in developing a particular area of study, so we supported each other in doing that by reading together. This was probably as important as anything: we didn’t just make time to read texts that others were interested in but we recognized this is precisely how a collective practice might begin. This is how we could build a language together, across disciplines. And here, when I say across disciplines, I use it both to describe our attempts to learn to speak to one another as very diverse artist trained in our respective silos, as well as the texts themselves, equally diverse in their disciplinary contributions. In addition to building a collective practice, we also wanted build an interdisciplinary one.

This is one of the first outputs that was produced under the banner of Self-Organized Seminar. I forgot about this and serendipitously found this in my copy of Empire a couple weeks ago, which accounts for the wear of this image.

Heidi Ratanavanich and I wrote this together in 2011 and presented it as our “work” in our MFA critique. We printed enough for our peers and discussed them together. Again, there was in a struggle to enact refusal as a form of production, but this was also a way for us to also communicate with our peers, who shared our conditions in almost every sense. You can get a sense of what we were thinking by what we thought was important to define for ourselves: Autonomy; Collaboration / Friendship / Collectivity; Institutional Critique; Expectations of production; Time & Speed; and Self Care. This small sheet also reflects that we were making attempts to reach out to our peers and widen our circle.

In a similar vein we organized and facilitated an “Institutional Critique seminar” in late 2011. We invited other graduate students, artists, and faculty. It was also open to the public.
We asked participants to read the texts beforehand, which we scanned and organized a free reader before the conference. We shared this with participants prior to the seminar as well as provided the link on all of the promotional materials and our website.

As an aside, the distribution of texts for free was something that was important to us, too. You can still grab dozens of free pdf of books off of our website.

Included in this reader were staples like Andrea Fraser but also excerpts from Marc Bosquet’s *How the University Works*, an important critique of the increasingly privatizing University, and Gene Ray and Gerald Raunig’s excellent edited volume *Art and Contemporary Practices: Reinventing Institutional Critique*.

We used the seminar to try and politicize the space of graduate school. We treated this seminar, in many ways, as an consciousness raising or agitational session, if you would permit the use of some activist terminology. But we also simply wanted to broaden our group to include others to help us think about the space we inhabited together.

*Shadow of Debt: Participatory Relief* is the last public-facing project we completed. We asked conference goers at a printmaking conference to pull prints of their cumulative debt to suggest a collective condition rather than an individual burden.

We pre-made an image of a brain-factory and made some linoleum stencils so folks could print quickly and easily. We plays songs about money, often silly song likes Wu-Tang Clan’s “C.R.E.A.M.” (Cash Rules Everything Around Me) and Dire Straits’ “Money for Nothing” which made for a lighter atmosphere.

We also photographed everyone with their prints before they took them, which is what you see above. The photos remind me both of mug-shots, where the accused holds their numbers distributed by the...
state, and simultaneously proud grads posing with their diploma. This dovetails back to what I discussed previously with Lazzarato—debt predicts the future. This is indeed a sentence that will prohibit movement to years into the future.

What we tried to do was ask how artists could resist considering themselves human capital, valorized by their own investments in the reproduction of the university system. We asked how we might commit to a radical practice that considers the reproduction of the subject of capital—the indebted, the student, the artist, the worker—a site of institutional critique? To quote Marta Malo de Molina:

_The co-production of critical knowledge generates rebellious bodies. Thinking about rebellious practices provides/gives value and potency to those same practices. Collective thinking engenders common practice._

Or, recalling Silvia Federici: How can we reproduce people for the struggle rather than reproduce them for the labor market? This is also a question of resisting structural violence.

In my proposal to this symposium I said that _Self-Organized Seminar_ was a failure. It is a failure in that we couldn’t sustain it. Many of us we quickly returned to molding ourselves to the academic market. From this perspective, it had no choice but to fail, as with any anti-capitalist project.

Now that I teach full-time, I can see continued influences from our work in _Self-Organized Seminar_. In particular, my own feminist analysis has evolved now that I am an instructor, literally reproducing the indebted subjects I described at the beginning of this presentation. I’ve adapted or developed my thinking on the importance of embodied critique on in two related ways. First, it is primarily staff, women, and queer folks doing care-work for students. To name an obvious example, for each student who discloses a trauma they experience, my women and queer colleagues hear about a dozen. Which brings us to the other form of embodiment that stares at me every class period: students carry so much trauma with them. Of course they do, as so many do. And of course this trauma is raced and gendered.

Reflecting on re/producing bodies that can not only resist capitalism but survive this trauma involves trying to create the conditions where both teachers and students can support one another in a meaningful ways. This support system also requires an aesthetic production that falls outside the bounds of academic spaces and discourse. This involves a profound feminist and anti-racist pedagogy, one that point away from institution by naming structural and institutional violence rather than appealing to those institutions for reform. Again we return to occupy and evacuate. This, too, is something we can learn from the failures of the canon of institutional critique, who now are wholly embraced in the capitalist museum.

I don’t have the answers to this problem, but perhaps that is something we can reflect on, together. To wrap up, I thought I’d end by sharing one project I’ve worked on in the past with students regarding debt.

In a fairly traditional 2D foundations class, I introduced students to a brief history of student debt since the ’70s.
We read a chapter from this book, *The Debt Resisters’ Manual* which was produced by the activist group Strike Debt, which emerged out of the Occupy movement. I dug up some statistics about the rising tuition specific to the institution we were at, and did some basic math as to what it would cost to finish their degree in four years—about $100,000. What I tried to do was denaturalize the debt by providing some history. I hoped this would politicize the space and help students complicate how they thought about school as a site for job-training, self-fulfillment, liberation, or escape, and instead point to the violence of the institutions we are all part of. I next asked students to create a map based on the concept of “money and the university”.

The results varied from personal maps of how the students’ parents and grandparents support them to elaborate breakdowns of faculty salaries by college.

In the project below the student figured out the total cost of her yearly education and broke it down into monthly fees, using the faux bank statement as the form to communicate the numbers. I particularly like this one because of the personal nature of the hand-drawn statement with the very real numbers that burden her.

Those that are familiar with Kate Bingaman-Burt’s drawings will recognize her strong influence here. I showed my students her work for some inspiration. Bingaman-Burt did a series of monthly drawing of her credit card bills for six years between 2004-2010—the amount of time it took her to pay off her credit card debt.

Anecdotally, I met Kate when she came through Austin. She told the story of how, after learning about her project, many of her students would start speaking with her about their bills, how to pay them, their stress about them, what they should do to pay them off, etc. The is an one example of the ways art and the reproduction of subjects of violence, in this case students, can so quickly overflow the academic space.
And this brings me back to considering not only how I participate in autonomous and artist-run culture, but how I produce young artists to participate in, elaborate, and develop further the projects we are here at Beyond Alternatives to discuss.

And this is why I am really happy to be here with you all and I am really excited to learn from your efforts and participate in this conversations. I’m happy to answer any questions y’all may have.

Thank you!