# ‘Messy Democracy’: Democratic Pedagogy and its Discontents

Fig. 1. ‘CUNTHOUSE’. ‘Messy Democracy’, installation view.

> ‘One can teach what one doesn’t know if the student is emancipated [...] To emancipate an ignorant person, one must be, and one need only be, emancipated oneself’ (Rancière 1991: 15).
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> ‘Democracy stirs, but the mess stirs alongside it’ (Rancière 2010: 47).

## Introduction

> “All the group was asked to talk about their experiences of art education and my experience is ... it was twenty years ago I did my BA and there was quite a strong feminist presence on the course. I’d voiced certain views at the meeting about women artists and representation […] but my views weren’t widely received by the group and there was almost a kind of anti-feminist position by the women,

which was quite shocking and at the end of the meeting I just felt so frustrated, and I thought this can't be right" (Messy Democracy participant, 2018).

This paper offers a critical case study of a recent residency by the artists' collective @.ac (www.attackdotorg.com), resulting in the exhibition 'Messy Democracy' (Hanover Project, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, 9th April - 2nd May 2018) (fig. 1). Inspired by the art school's radical past, this project sought to generate an interstitial (Mahony 2016) space of autonomous student dissent within the neoliberal art school. The resulting 'occupation' operated as a testing ground for the autodidact hypothesis of Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991). Both residency and this supplementary reading foreground disagreement as a mode of participation: a critical strategy developed from Rancière's idiosyncratic conceptualisation of 'democracy' in *Disagreement* (1999). This paper seeks to draw special attention to the ways the @.ac residency made visible what Rancière, in *Dissensus* (2010: 45-61), has called the 'democratic paradox': the fundamental incompatibility between the democratic impulse and the pragmatic structures necessary for its management. It achieves this by spectacularising dissensus through a mode of relational art practice (Martin 2007; Bourriaud 2002 [1998]); a model which is consistent with the similarly spectacular character of Rancièrean politics.

This politics has been defined as 'theatocratic' (Hallward 2006: 110; Davis 2010: 74), due to the extent to which it stages or makes visible dissensual voices otherwise ignored, or even silenced, by the miscount at the heart of commonplace notions of community, society, and democracy (Rancière 1999: 6). For Rancière, such conceptualisations rely on normative assumptions which depend on the elision of difference or dissensus for their stability. When such conceptualisations are invoked to frame all differences and antagonisms in the illusory harmony of structural consensus, they function to repress politics proper in the manner of ideology. As Ellsworth (1989) demonstrates, pedagogy, even in its most critical mode, is not immune to such assumptions and, instead, frequently reproduces them. This is especially true of conceptions of the 'student voice', 'inclusion', and 'empowerment'; conceptions which both critical pedagogy and neoliberal education employ, albeit towards very different ends. Quite possibly, as the replicable science of education, pedagogy depends on the logic of such normative assumptions for its own systematic reproduction and professional validation. If this is the case, then there is a doubly oppressive logic at the core of all pedagogies: firstly, this normative, classifying, taxonomic force which seeks to deny the problem of difference in favour of the programmatic pursuit of universalising ends, and secondly, an assumption which Rancière identifies as the basis of all educational method: the presumed inequality of intelligences between teacher and educator, reproduced in the scene of teaching itself (1991: 7).

With this understanding, the apparently oxymoronic character of 'democratic education', repeatedly identified by Biesta (2006; 2008; 2011), cannot solely result from the undemocratic nature of the dominant-hegemonic economic system; the argument which most critical pedagogy wishes to make. Neither can it be solely a result of the

irreconcilable difference between democracy as idea and democracy as system of government (Derrida 1993; 1994; Rancière 1999; 2010). Though, as this essay will argue, neoliberalism has transformed the university beyond recognition, depoliticising and de-democratising it in the process (Readings 1996; Brown 2015), the scandalous wrong of Rancière's philosophy for progressive educators is that it might be this originary inequality between teacher and student that ultimately prevents education from becoming truly democratic. In contrast, Rancière's *Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) employs the hypothesis of the universal equality of intelligences to see 'what can be done under that supposition' of equality (46).

Similarly, the @.ac residency proceeds from an egalitarian presumption of the capacity of those presumed ignorant to self-educate, independent from stultifying instruction from 'master-explicators' (4-8). The project (described below) 'theatocratically' stages the removal of pedagogical labour, theory and method as a form of dissensual politics against education and, paradoxically, in the name of education. Whilst our paper argues that education 'for democracy' is an impossibility, it certainly doesn't preclude the possibility of democratic education, on the strict understanding that it must exist 'beyond teaching', with dissensus, disagreement, and difference as its irreducible conditions. In this regard, both @.ac exhibition and this paper test the theoretical hypotheses of Rancière through practice. In the same manner, they also contribute to 'Critical Pedagogy', and the emerging field of 'Critical University Studies' (McLaren 2002 [1989]; Washburn 2005; Bousquet 2008; Newfield 2008). Going further, following the most radical conclusion of Rancière's *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, our work stakes pedagogical suicide for the possibility of democratic education. However, instead of outlining a programmatic model, the discussion below aims to reveal glimpses of a nascent pedagogic democracy, or 'democratic education to come', made politically visible through the absence of pedagogy.

## The Beyond of Teaching

Our activity aimed to decouple the notion of democracy, particularly democratic education, from its automatic equation with extant western liberal democracies; we contend that this must be made visible within the institutional frame of the university itself as practice, and the model we looked to was the art school occupations at Hornsey, Brighton, Guildford, Croydon, Leeds, and elsewhere, during 1968 - *The Hornsey Film* (Holland 1970) was a key reference. We consider these occupations as democratically productive forms of practice, triggered, in part, by the romantic discourses of the art school (Atkinson and Baldwin 1967): reasons why we remain interested in the art school as site of contestation today. At the same time, the art school was also chosen as a site of hauntological commemoration. Following Benjamin (1999: 462), the ambition was to bring past and present together in a critical constellation, generating a dialectical image of art school dissensus, which could be wielded as a weapon against its current stagnation and capitulation to the economic. This mode of practice attempted to rupture presumed continuities between art education, past and present, producing an opportunity to envision

the ‘beyond’ of art education by remembering its historical contestations. Imagining this ‘beyond’ requires an epistemic shift which Rancière would describe as a total ‘redistribution of the sensible’ (2004: 43): a deconstruction that would invert or collapse institutional logics, hierarchies, and pedagogies, shifting questions of inclusion and participation onto demonstrations of the difference between ‘democracy’ and ‘consensus’ (Derrida 1994: 61-95; Rancière 2009: 95-122).

The contemporary reference we identified with the 1968 occupations is Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s notion of the ‘undercommons’ (2009). They claim that ‘the only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one’ (Edu-Factory Collective 2009: 145) and that progressive educators can only strive to steal back the qualitative within the ‘undercommons’ of the quantifying logic of the economic. In this reading, to ‘teach’ is to be complicit with one’s own oppression and that of others. However, the ‘other side of teaching’ can provide a stage through which the systematic interpellation of democracy and/or politics by the university can be made visible. As Harney and Moten argue,

> ‘What is that work and what is its social capacity for both reproducing the university and producing fugitivity? If one were to say teaching, one would be performing the work of the university. Teaching is merely a profession and an operation of what Jacques Derrida calls the onto-/auto encyclopedic circle of the Universitas. But it is useful to invoke this operation to glimpse the hole in the fence where labor enters, to glimpse its hiring hall, its night quarters. The university needs teaching labor, despite itself, or as itself, self-identical with and thereby erased by it. It is not teaching then that holds this social capacity, but something that produces the not visible other side of teaching, a thinking through the skin of teaching toward a collective orientation to the knowledge object as future project, and a commitment to what we want to call the prophetic organization’ (Harney and Moten in Edu-Factory 2009: 146).

This ‘beyond of teaching’ (146) suggests the necessity of scandalous actions on the part of educators - the withdrawal of knowledge labour, the theft of qualitative time, the refusal of subjection, ‘the negligence of professionalization, and the professionalization of the critical academic’ (147) – to challenge the university’s recuperative maintenance of the prevailing order. Within this epistemic ‘police order’, which silences dissensus for consensus, Rancière (1999) contends that scandalous dissent will only be acknowledged when staged as visibly and dramatically as possible. Within his system, this spectacularisation of ‘dissensus’ (2010), or the egalitarian claim of ‘the part that has no part’ (1999: 65), constitutes ‘politics’ (21-42); a form of ideological and democratic struggle so dependent on dramatisation that Hallward (2006) has characterised it as ‘theatocracy’.

The @.ac residency at UCLan tested the capacity of 'theatocracy' to initiate Moten and Harney's call for scandalous action. It dramatised the aporetic 'beyond of teaching' by staging the total removal of knowledge-labour. Our anticipation was that this spectacle of non-teaching would highlight the paradox of 'universal education' (Rancière 1991: 16); namely, that everybody has the capacity to learn without without a 'master explicator', yet 'no one wants to cope with the intellectual revolution [this] signifies' (16). Furthermore, we insist on this 'beyond of teaching' as a pedagogic and political end in itself, not a means towards the ends of democratic education, sociability, or politics, let alone neoliberal educational ends such as 'employability', 'entrepreneurship', or 'excellence' (Readings 1996: 21-43). Finally, we argue that art education is uniquely situated for constructing 'theatocratic' politics, not just simply because of Rancière's repeated turn to examples from the theatre, alongside literature and the visual arts, as metaphors for the constructed stage of democracy (2011b; 2012: 1-40). Recent critical debates around social engagement and inclusion in art practice (Martin 2007; Beech 2008) have drawn attention to how the 'buzzword' of participation frequently promises more than participatory art can politically deliver. Rather than lament the paucity of such projects, or simply attack the structural violence of the strategic imposition of political narratives on all participants regardless, we suggest that the structural contradictions and shortcomings of such works are in fact necessary consequences of democracy. Following Rancière's work on the aesthetics of politics (2004; 2009; 2010), we suggest that it is only in the staging of democracy that its irreducibly dissensual elements, which make consensus democracy an illusion of ideology, can be made visible in their maddening political heterogeneity. We believe that staging the prevailing 'distribution of the sensible' and its possible 'redistribution' is a necessary consequence of political art projects and politicised art education.

Nonetheless, we are aware that what follows then, by necessity, may appear as a purely negative attempt at destroying prevailing pedagogic method, or even a meditation on the impossibility of pedagogy per se. It certainly offers little in the way of a pedagogical toolkit for progressive educators. The project's shortcomings, missteps, and inadequacies, which include internal resistance by its various actors, reveal as much about the difficulties involved in pursuing democracy as educational ideal as educational method. In the final analysis, the revelation and subsequent recognition of these insurmountable difficulties is the project's educational method.

## Democracy and Education

Our project responds specifically to the Rancièrean reading of democracy, taken from *Disagreement* (2009) and, to a lesser extent, *Dissensus* (2010: 45-61). Part of this task involves demonstrating how the democratic political impulse is enabled or recuperated within the pedagogic scene. This dialectic of 'politics', as the paradoxical claim of the 'part that have no part' (2009: 65) within the social order, and 'police', as the systematic, structural, or ideological silencing of that egalitarian claim, is the central dynamic of Rancière's philosophical system (Hallward 2006: 110; Davis 2010: 74).

Needless to say, this animates his theory of education as much as his work on art, literature, and aesthetics, which could be characterised as articulating a political idea of 'subjectification' (2009: 35-42), against the policed 'stultification' (1991: 12-18) by social, cultural, or institutional authorities. This dynamic, which is always already pedagogic, underpins his disavowal of Althusserianism in *Althusser's Lesson* (2011b), his celebration of the extracurricular activities of the nineteenth century worker-poets in *Proletarian Nights* (2014), and his revelation of the generally contemptuous attitude of the political philosopher to the masses in *The Philosopher and His Poor* (2003). However, the Rancièrean theory of democratic education, or education as democratic politics, is most famously and directly articulated in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991). As suggested above, our project could be fairly characterised as a live experiment testing the central autodidact hypothesis of that volume.

A variety of critical theories of education have, of course, informed our general approach, but, as Gur Ze'ev (2010: 1) reminds us, it is almost impossible to speak of a singular 'Critical Pedagogy' today, given the diversity of the field and the incompatibility of the various divergent 'Critical Pedagogies'. We give, for instance, critical support to the project initiated by John Dewey with *Democracy and Education* (2005 [1919]), and similar support, also, to recent work from the United States, including Aronowitz (2008), Giroux (1983), Greene (1988), and McLaren (1989), which from the 90s onwards constitute 'Critical Pedagogy' as a canon. Our work does not attempt to 'decolonise' (Bidisha 2015) the art school, though we do not disregard the work of Paulo Freire (1970), bell hooks (1994), and others who write back to the attendant pedagogies of Empire. However, we would caution against the uncritical and general application of such theories to our particular context. As Rancière asserts, whoever 'teaches without emancipation stultifies' (1991: 81), but there is a danger with a universalising pedagogical identification with the pedagogic rhetoric of hooks, Freire, et al, which, outside of the specificities of their cultural struggle, can lead to the misguided assumption that all education, regardless of class, gender, or racial contexts, proceeds from a shared goal of 'freedom' or 'emancipation'. Elizabeth Ellsworth's essay 'Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?' (1989) speaks to the consequences of such an approach: she reports on a class called 'Media and Anti-racist Pedagogies' delivered at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1988, which set out to empower marginalised, minority voices, but ended up exacerbating 'the very conditions [they] were trying to work against, including Eurocentrism, racism, sexism, classism, and "banking education" (Ellsworth 1989: 298). As Ellsworth demonstrates, these were direct consequences of a general curriculum of 'liberatory pedagogy', the abstract language of which silenced the socio-cultural specificities of individual oppression (299).

Like Ellsworth, Gur Ze'ev (2010) has drawn attention to the redundancy of such universals, particularly as educational ideals, in the face of what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005 [1999]) called the 'New Spirit of Capitalism'. For Gur Ze'ev, the heterogeneous forces of globalised neoliberal capitalism have transformed geopolitical relations and identities, deconstructing 'the pre-conditions for transcendence (and therefore also for edifying "critique")' (2010: 10). In the face of this, the old lexicons of educational emancipation begin to resemble the worst form of bourgeois humanist ideology. More problematically, as the Ellsworth paper demonstrates, the elision of difference within the

rhetoric of emancipation can accidently reproduce a reactionary 'surrendering of the victims to their victimization processes' (Gur Ze'ev 2010: 10). Ellsworth's solution, which has been influential to our approach, is to embrace a 'pedagogy of the unknowable' (1989: 318-24).

Given the above, our project proceeded from the critique of neoliberalism, implied as necessary by Gur Ze'ev. This involved not only a recognition of the specific and divergent subjectivities interpellated by neoliberal monoculturalism, but also the extent to which neoliberal logics are internalised within the university. One of the most trenchant recent critiques of the wholescale effects of neoliberalism is Wendy Brown's (2015) *Undoing the Demos*, which includes numerous references to the academy (22-4; 175-200). Brown's thesis argues that neoliberalism 'economises' (17) cultural practices, institutions, politics, and behaviours, on an individual and national level, to such a degree that their political character disappears within the economic. In effect, neoliberalism substitutes *homo politicus* with *homo oeconomicus* (31) - both state and individual model their aspirations on the corporate ambitions and strategy of the modern firm, such as 'economic growth, competitive positioning, and brand enhancement' rather than democratic ideals such as 'equality, liberty [and] inclusion' (26-7). This neoliberal transformation of the university had already been recognised by the writers working under the *nom de guerre* Edu-Factory Collective (2009; 2011). Jeffrey Williams demonstrates that the fees structure of American universities has created a 'pedagogy of debt' (Edu-Factory Collective 2009: 89-96) underpinning all university degrees; Jason Read sees the possibility of the university as a pedagogic commons increasingly restricted due to neoliberal enclosures (151-3); Newfield argues that the crisis of the US university is a direct result of 'the conservative attacks on the democratization of society that the post-World War II university - especially the public university - was spreading in American society' (179).

Even before the work of the Edu-Factory Collective, Readings (1996) claimed the neoliberal university was 'in ruins', bereft of any tangible cultural mission, governed by the empty managerial rhetoric of 'excellence' (21-43) rather than Humboldtian ideals of cultural advancement or 'bildung' (62-9). Similarly, writing to the UK context, McGettigan (2011) argues that recent neoliberal reforms to higher education, by accelerating its 'commodification', 'marketisation' and 'financialisation' (McGettigan 2013: 25; 64-5) have transformed the sector beyond recognition. Once conceived as a public good, worthy of public funding, higher education is now conceived as a human capital investment in oneself, necessarily financed individually (McGettigan 2013). Acutely aware of the financial consequences of failure, increasingly more students 'invest' in potentially more lucrative STEM subjects than the arts and humanities (Adams 2017). The 'Browne Review' (2010) promised to democratise the sector but, in many ways, had the opposite effect. The trebling of tuition fees, currently £9,275 p.a., has had a disproportionate effect on part-time students (Horrock 2018) and mature students (Coughlan 2018), whose hitherto unseen barriers to HE access, many of them fiscal, are slowly being made apparent.

This dismal democratisation through financialisation has not only made the university less democratic, but entrenched its function as Althusserian ISA (1971: 145-7):

the ‘pedagogy of debt’ not only shackles students to neoliberalism via an unpayable personal debt mountain (Williams in Edu-Factory Collective, 2009: 95) but also teaches a particular worldview. In this ideology, there is no thing as society, nothing in life comes for free, freedom comes through consumption, and no other world is possible other than the neoliberal consensus (95-6). On the other side of the coin, the marketisation of the sector, triggered by the removal of the institutional student number cap, has mutated HE from a consensual parliamentary democracy into a vicious Hobbesian ‘war of all against all’. As part of this, metric-driven league tables such as the REF, TEF, and now KEF, promise democracy by enabling informed student choice. The real consequences of this is an audit culture which pits managers against staff, students against teachers, and institution against institution; the educational version of what Rancière would characterise as a ‘society of contempt’ (1991: 75-100). In the face of this dysfunctional neoliberal consensus, Derrida (1994: xviii) famously asks “Whither Marxism?”; Readings (1998) might ask “Whither bildung?” Our question, inseparable from both of these, is simply “Whither education?”, let alone art education, dissensus, or democracy, within this equation.

To address this question, one must address the homonymy surrounding questions of democracy, acknowledged by Biesta (2006), Brown (2015: 18-21), Rancière (2009: 83-93), and most others who tackle the subject. This homonymy precedes questions of democratic education; embodying the différend (Lyotard 1988) at the heart of discussions of democracy per se. The ideological vacuum, post-communism, has entrenched neoliberal consensus (Derrida 1994: 61-95; Charlesworth 2002; Rancière 2009: 95-122; Brown 2015: 17-45) conflating the homonyms ‘democracy’ and ‘neoliberal democracy’ into synonyms. Rancière has famously characterised this as the ‘consensus system’ (2009: 95). To move beyond this, Rancière and Brown suggest resisting a contained definition in favour of an insistence on the political character of democracy as self-rule (20). Similarly, Biesta challenges the presumed function of ‘democratic education’ to be primarily the education of democratic citizens (2006). For expedience, we simply reiterate that the triumph of liberal democracy has not made the neoliberal university noticeably more democratic, and limit our discussion of the important and directly relevant work of Biesta (2006; 2008; 2011; 2013; 2017) to the following comments.

Firstly, we share Biesta’s (1998: 30) concern to highlight the ‘impossibility’ of education; doubts which throw the project of all pedagogies, even critical ones, into question. Biesta (2006) has suggested the democratic education has the ‘double duty’ for ‘the creation of worldly spaces and their undoing’. He hinges this thesis on the Derridean notion of ‘democracy-to-come’ (Derrida 1994: 81-2; 212-3) which equates the possibility of democracy with an infinite openness to the ‘radical otherness of the other’ (Derrida 1997: 14). For Derrida, the demand to be recognised and included as you are, without reduction to a normative schema, is both a demand for justice and an impossibility within the current conjuncture. Manifest as relationality, justice implies an approach to the unknown; hence, what it might mean to address the other justly eludes determination. In contrast to such undecidability, normative schema offered an illusory and comforting clarity:

> ‘When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make, irresponsibly and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program’ (Derrida 1992: 41).

For Biesta, the problem with ‘committed’ critical pedagogies is that they operate according to such a normative model. This approach is typified for him by the work of McLaren (Biesta 1998: 205-6), though the charge could be levelled at many others within the field. When critical pedagogy calls for emancipation through an understanding of our situation, it always tends to elide the specificity and heterogeneity of situated knowledge within the construction of revolutionary and broadly applicable collective programme. In this regard, though critical pedagogy speaks truth to power, it tends towards a blindness towards its own contamination ‘by the operations of power’ (206). At the heart of this blindness is a ‘positive utopianism’ (Gur Ze’ev 1998: 463; Biesta 1998: 501-2) which uncritically assumes the knowledge of the oppressed to be superior to that of the oppressor. Biesta thus identifies a double bind in critical pedagogy - to emancipate, it champions situated knowledge; by championing situated knowledge, it reproduces oppression in new forms. Acknowledging this double-bind is to proceed, like *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière 1991), without clear knowledge of any specific future – an ignorance into which a future may possibly be disclosed (Biesta 1998).

In contrast to Derrida’s notion of ‘democracy-to-come’ (Derrida 1994), our project ‘Messy Democracy’ engages with a Rancierian model of ‘democratic paradox’ (Ranciere 2008). In *Dissensus* (2010) Rancière argues that moments of dissensus can articulate a paradox at the core of democracy making the ‘otherness of the other’, endlessly deferred within Derrida’s reading, visible as a manifestation of heterology within social relations. Rancière argues that this paradoxical relation is manifest as the discontinuity between ‘democracy as a form of government [and] democracy as a form of social and political life and so the former must repress the latter’ (2010: 47). Put another way, the proper name of ‘Democracy’ can be invoked to support any governmental action, including the suppression of the democratic impulses of the demos through anti-democratic exemption. Yet, as Ranciere notes, democracy is always already the ‘politics’ that subverts all governments; the ‘supplementary, or grounding, power that at once legitimises and de-legitimises every set of institutions or the power of any one set of people (2010: 52). Derrida has referred to this peculiarly destructive or implosive quality as democracy’s ‘auto-immunity’ (Derrida 1993; 1994: 177), the circularity of which can only be broken through receptivity to the other, or the ‘democracy-to-come’. Rancière’s counter to both Derrida, and by implication Biesta, is that

> ‘democracy is this principle of otherness. Rather than a power of self, democracy is the disruption of such a power and of the circularity of the arkhè. It is an anarchic principle that must be presupposed for politics to exist at all and insofar

as it is anarchic it precludes the self-grounding of politics, establishing it instead as a seat of division' (Rancière 2010: 53).

Following this, we argue for an impossible pedagogy based on the dissensual and permanent articulation of the 'part that has no part' against all systems of governance, even those which profess to be emancipatory. Figured thus, democratic education is neither utopian nor deferred, but immanent to 'politics' itself, and democracy is a dissensual structure of co-existent and contradictory heterogeneities working constantly against dominant-hegemonic ideology or, as Rancière, would phrase it, 'the distribution of the sensible' (2004: 12; 2009: 57-60, 124-5).

The 'theatocratic' model we have outlined takes form when democratic paradox spectacularises an energetic discontinuity between forms of governance and individual politics. Davis (2010: 74) has identified that Rancièrean politics is manifested in three distinct phases: first, 'an argumentative demonstration'; second, 'a theatrical dramatisation'; and finally, 'a 'heterologic disidentification', demonstrating the democratic paradox of our 'being together to the extent we are in between - between names, identities, cultures, and so on' (Rancière in Davis 2010: 84). In practice, as our case study attests, these parameters fragment and intersect in a complex and uneven dynamic. In contrast to Davis's processual model, our exhibition indicated that argumentation, dramatisation, and disidentification intersect within and between the various dimensions of the 'theatocratic' event. Through these intersections the politics of aesthetics (primarily embodied through disidentification) and aesthetics of politics (primarily embodied through argumentation) mutually disrupt each other.

The 'theatocratic' event can be art when these dynamic components constitute a sensuous manifestation of a concept in contestation - in the case of our project the concept is democratic education. This model is consistent with Rancière's insistence upon a dissensual relation between art's resistance to conceptual appropriation and its political context - the way it resists power. 'The problem is […] to maintain the very tension by which a politics of art and a poetics of politics tend towards each other, but cannot meet up without suppressing themselves.' (Rancière 2010: 183) One response to these correlated moments of resistance is to call for a synthesis of aesthetics and politics in the art form, to bring forth an event capable of transforming the distribution of the sensible (Fynsk 2017: 65). Such a claim requires fusing the experience artworks embody with a material form 'to extract a bloc of sensations' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 167) conflating sensuous resistance and political resistance in the form of a becoming. The problem Rancière identifies here is the emphatic nature of such work, which he considers can cancel ambiguity, and risk entering social relations as political dogma. In contrast, the 'theatocratic' event advances tension between non-cognitive or aesthetic and determinate political dimensions. Affects trigger responses and responses produce effects; energetic discontinuity mobilised in a social field is the form of the work. Hal Foster might call such a work 'post-critical' as part of his call for art that de-fetishizes (Foster 2015: 122, 124). We emphasise that the case for critical art practice is no different to critical pedagogy and re-iterate Ellsworth's commentary – for whom, in what context,

and with what assumptions? The ‘theatocratic’ model advances all vectors of dissensus and is a multiplication of critique that acknowledges the right of all actors to contribute.

## Messy Democracy

As suggested above, the @.ac exhibition ‘Messy Democracy’ sought to stage a ‘theatocratic’ event within the neoliberal art school; an ‘occupation’ of its institutional frame by its student-consumers. The aims of this intervention were threefold. Firstly, to make visible a plurality of dissensual student voices as politics against the incorporated ‘student voice’ of the neoliberal university’s consumer satisfaction surveys and marketing messages. Secondly, to draw attention to the intellectual and pedagogic labour of the academic precariat through its spectacular and political withdrawal. Thirdly, in lieu of the withdrawn labour of the ‘master-explicators’, this intervention became a test of the central hypothesis of Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991); an experiment which would hopefully begin to suggest the ‘beyond of teaching’ alluded to above.

Spectators and participants were invited to engage with this experiment in the manner of a conventional exhibition. This exhibition operated as a ‘theatocratic’ stage where the contradictions, power relations, and politics of the neoliberal art school were made visible in dissensus. It was envisaged in three stages, broadly following the sequence of Rancièrean politics outlined above. However, the deliberately anarchic character resisted such sequential and structural order. Indeed, to attempt to impose an interpretive order to this project post-hoc would be to enact the worst kind of police order violence on the nascent politics which emerged. The following short discussion is arranged into sequential stages for methodological illustration only; to do justice to the political plurality which emerged form, and ultimately overturned, that structure would need significantly more attention possible within this short paper, if it is possible to speak for dissensual politics at all.

The ‘argumentative demonstration’ was initiated by @.ac through a meeting with eighteen students from BA Fine Art, MA Fine Art and MA Photography on the 12th February, following an open invitation to collaborate sent cross-faculty. During this meeting participants decided upon the formation of a steering committee that would function as mediator between @.ac and students. The imposition of a bureaucratic structure on the project felt like a strategic compromise from the outset, though it was difficult to imagine how dissensus could be facilitated otherwise. As with the imagined socialist utopias, it was expected that this quasi-state would gradually wither away, and that the ‘occupation’ would follow an anarchic path of its own. Unsurprisingly, the establishment of Rancièrean pedagogy was difficult without recourse to existing operational structures and pedagogico-managerial modes. Indeed, this became one of the more interesting discoveries of the project. Initiating the project drew @.ac into techniques, such as didactic ‘briefings’, which perpetuated the hierarchical tutor / student dynamic. Attempts at facilitating radical inclusion, such as open calls, university wide planning meetings, and workshops, generated enthusiasm, albeit in small numbers. Sessions included powerful contributions from genuinely marginalised voices, but the

heterogeneity of these dissensual voices also created a destabilising and ultimately debilitating stasis. As disagreement heightened, withdrawal from the dissensual 'theatocratic' model began to appear for many as a more viable way of 'working together'. A 'consensus model' took hold, setting-up a value structure consistent with both reactionary liberal and misguided critical pedagogy. Undeniably, the majority of faculty did not respond to the call to participate, bathetically invalidating the project's aspirations for 'radical inclusion'. The relationship between low participation and a broader wider student apathy with the HE status quo is a factor here. Yet this is a familiar problem with participatory art projects and indeed participatory education – to force inclusion for democratic ends is auto-immunitary, but without widescale participation how can any project claim to be representative? Ultimately, non-participation is a form of democratic dissensus and must at least be recognized as such.

Another general issue within such projects is their tendency to impose pre-established parameters which deny participants the option to contribute parameters of their own (Bishop 2012: 1). Dave Beech claims that 'to participate in an art event […] is to enter into a pre-established social environment that casts the participant in a very specific role' (2008: 3). Rather than this 'consensus model', prioritising agreement through the fixity of roles, a Rancièrean model of democratic education would gauge its viability through disagreement, decentralising all roles, identities, and aims. Some of the initial staged group activities succeeded in bringing these antagonisms to the fore. An activity involving participants writing down and discussing their perceptions of the problems with HE on a sheet of paper covering the floor (fig. 2.) produced genuine, if unproductive, dissensus. Complaints about gender inequality by some students were attacked by others as an attempt to hijack the space in the name of feminism and identity politics. Similarly, when one student disclosed her autism she felt others framed it incorrectly as a disability. In a subsequent session, the question of how to accommodate themes as diverse as class politics, university fees, and gender inequality within an exhibition exacerbated these antagonisms. Strategic planning was often coloured by implicit, and at times explicit, dissent. For example, one student directly attacked the whole purpose of the exhibition, as well as the competency of his tutors and peers to resolve the exhibition to the standards that he considered professional, before dramatically announcing his withdrawal from the process. These dissensual antagonisms paved the way for the students to retreat into their own 'consensus model' mediated by the steering committee. The logic of the status quo, as this activity proved, is incompatible with 'openness to the otherness of the other', which in its radical alterity is generally perceived as antagonism and met by a 'police order' repressive response.

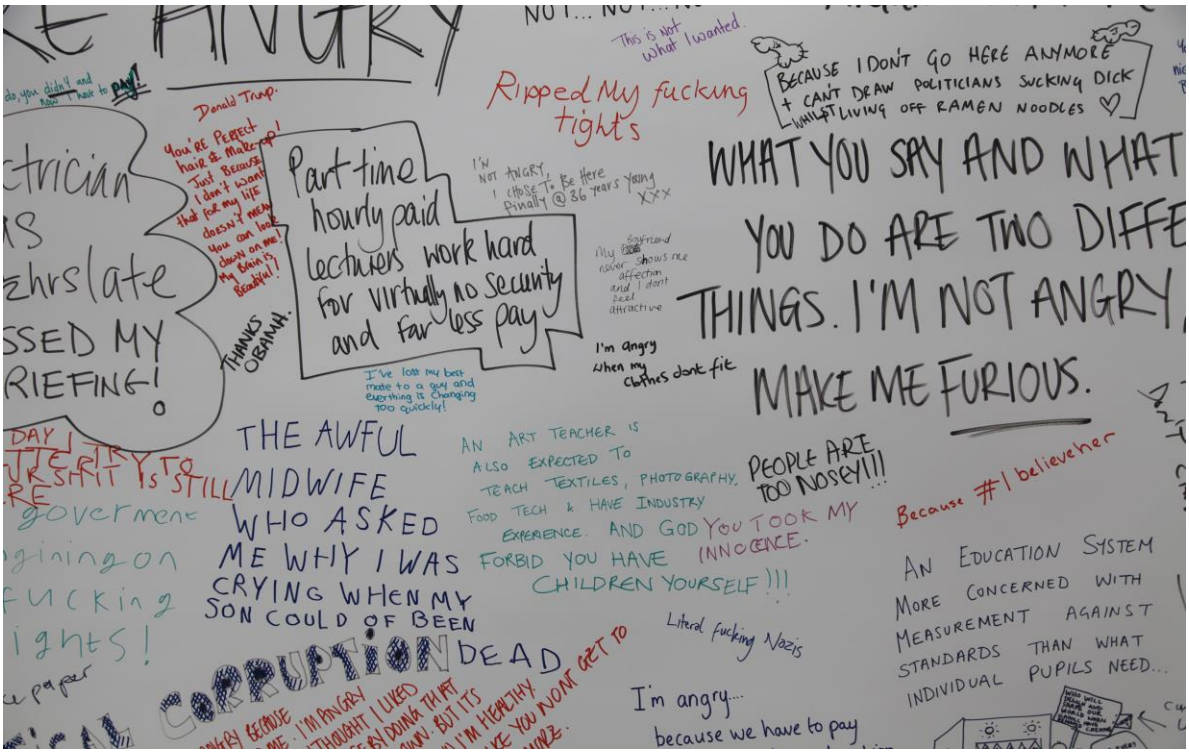


Fig. 2. Facilitated workshop during the planning stages of Messy Democracy

Overall, the month-long project demonstrated the three-part structure of Rancièrean politics in a chaotic and intermittent manner, though its various aspects broadly align with different components of the 'theatocratic' event. The 'theatrical dramatisation' of this dissensus consisted in the cladding of Hanover Project's white walls in chipboard, allowing students to work directly on the walls. This material transformation was designed to emphasise the desired shift from transformation from passive consumption to active production. It also immediately made visible both the student 'occupation' and a variety of divergent identity politics. The dramatisation of the gallery as a 'free' space of educational exchange - accentuated by the removal of all professional educators and the recasting of 'students' and 'educators' as co-producers - constituted an auto-critique of the 'stultification' of art and art education (Rancière 1991: 13) in its institutional, commodified setting. As such, the mise-en-scène of the transformed gallery made visible the scandalous undercommons within the university, demonstrating the dependency of the neoliberal university on exploited knowledge-labour for its reproduction, and the capacity of students to self-organise their learning, independent of, and as equals to, their 'master-explicators'. The creative actions of participants aestheticised individual identity politics; moments of spectacular disidentification set apart from the everyday of educational practices. Subtly, these instances of 'emancipated spectatorship' (Rancière 2009b) bleed into the wider structures of the university as political questions. Such questions produce what Mahoney calls 'interstitial distance' (Mahony 2016; Critchley 2007). Speaking of recent student protests and occupations, Mahoney argues that these political actions open internal spaces within

institutions where power relations can be assessed, yet operate at a critical distance from them. In Critchley's words, such politics operates 'within the state against the state in a political articulation that attempts to open a space of opposition' (Critchley 2007: 114). 'Messy Democracy' dramatised an interstitial politics, 'performing or playing, in the theatrical sense of the word, the gap between a place where the demos exists and a place where it does not' (Rancière 1999: 88).

This dramatised art school undercommons also generated, and gave a platform to, self-organised collective dissensus. A feminist collective was formed in responses to the @.ac call, who subsequently staged a group action entitled 'CUNTHOUSE' (fig. 3); a reference to Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's 1972 exhibition 'Womanhouse'. This collective action directly resulted from disagreements within the planning process. MA Fine Art student Emma Willis stated, "Discussions have drawn a diverse range of issues to the attention of the students. One of the issues that stood out [was how] in what is still a very patriarchal system, there seems to be a lack of feminist knowledge". To compensate for this lack, 'CUNTHOUSE' screamed feminist dissensus into the vacuum of the patriarchal art school.

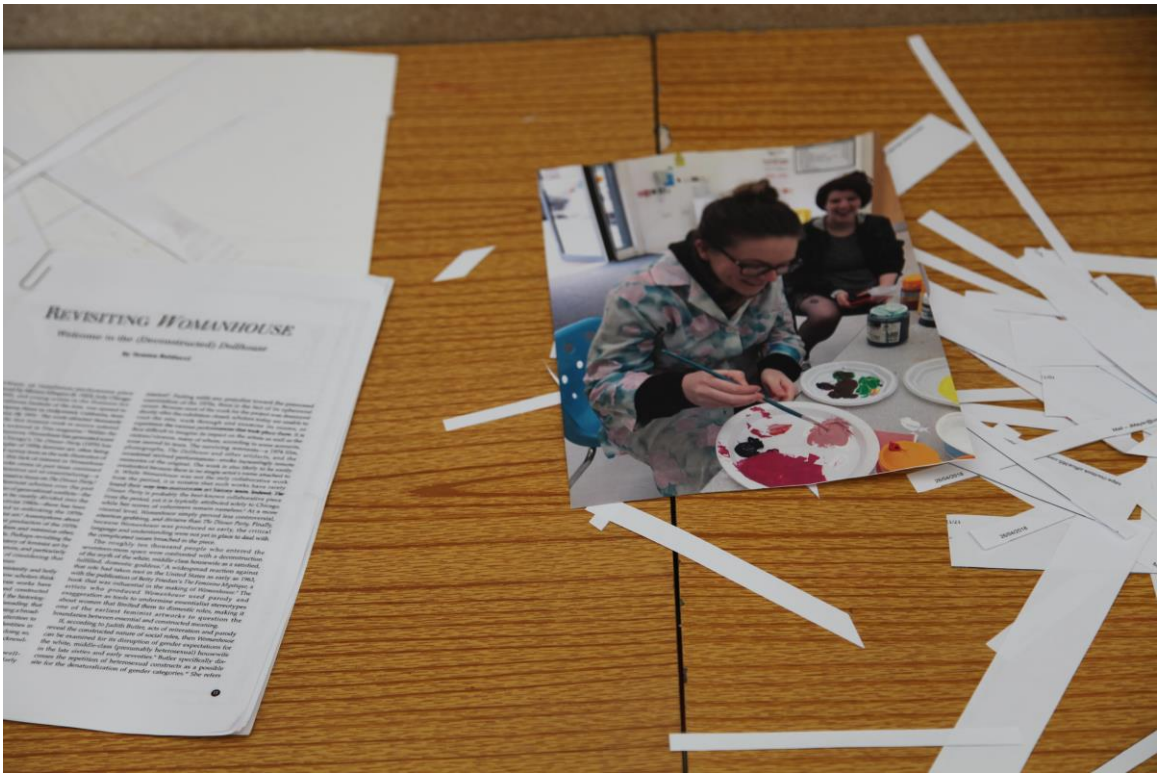


Fig. 3. Planning 'CUNTHOUSE'.

Finally, 'heterologic disidentification' (the irreducible otherness at the core of democracy) was made visible in the friction between student as consumer of the university and student as producer. Equally, in the gambit of independent learner and absent teacher, whose co-dependence was made manifest, cognisable, and thus resistible,

in every act of creative transgression. Finally, this was manifest in the unmanageable political heterogeneity produced by the project. Disagreements were mediated by the steering committee; effectively a 'policing' mechanism for the chaos of dissensus. To proceed at all, a compromise structure for the exhibition was implemented which gave each actor their own personal platform. Though the students agreed to frame this as a communal rolling programme of actions, inescapably these were also individuated demonstrations, existing in a fragile political and aesthetic truce with each other. Within the gallery, each contributor participated by adding to, co-existing with, and where necessary, rearranging existing installations. Therefore, the exhibition indicated methodological possibilities for democratic education within a contradictory relation of governance and demos in ways that are consistent with Rancière's notion of 'democratic paradox'. Whilst the open call atomised and individualised creative labour in a conventional exhibition mode, it allowed different articulations of practice to conmingle. The clutter of some people's production disrupted the display of other artworks. After initially consenting to work separately, participants often arrived at informal co-working arrangements in the gallery. For example, the gallery became an informal crèche seemingly without prior planning. The additive nature of the exhibition facilitated the artistic disruption of the 'consensus model' from which in turn attempted to enclose dissensus. These individual acts of dissensus, jarring with the imposed consensus of the exhibition structure, demonstrate the problematic of democratic education, and its auto-immunitary tendency to self-destruct.

Yet, these theatrical and heterologic moments produce alternate trajectories of thought and action; a community of dissensus comprised of subjective becomings and the 'equality of intelligences'. This contrasts with the pedagogy of the contemporary university, grounded in the authority of the lecturer who constantly reinstates distance between the students and themselves, reducing teaching to 'stultification' and 'performance' to grade bands. An education grounded in 'theatocracy' is a learning based in disrupted norms. This is different to Biesta's call for 'an ignorance that makes room for a disclosure' (Biesta 1998: 505). 'Theatocratic' disruption produces a spectacle of otherness that invokes heterology within its process. By transgressing modes of governance, the demos achieves the capacity to learn. Thus, the 'democratic paradox' (Rancière 2010) and 'the ignorant one's lesson' (Rancière 1991: 19-45) are realised 'theatocratically'.

We draw two related conclusions from the project. Firstly, components of the 'theatocratic' event intersect within dissensual mobile arrangements making it senseless to identify the 'theatocratic' model as a staged or phased process. Each component relates to the others in a relation of reciprocal presupposition, so each moment of dramatization, disidentification, and argumentation depends on the mobilising force of other 'theatocratic' components. Ranciere's work demonstrates the necessity of staging these elements simultaneously, so that the claims of the otherwise invisible share the stage with the crumbling of police-order relations which would render them invisible. Interstitial resistance is the disruptive force which reveals the former and dismantles the latter. To learn democratically appears to mean occupying a space between actions achieved through imposed models of consensus and acts of dissensus. Put differently, it means sustaining a stage capable of spectacularising moments of dissensus and permitting those

acts to collapse the stage that is their support. Secondly, as Derrida demonstrates, there is an auto-immunitary tipping point whereby moments of democratic dissensus ossify into forms of anti-democratic consensus management. Access to the spectacle of visibility thus appears to be synonymous with the social articulation of each participant's interests, manifest as a dissonant rhythm of inclusion and exclusion. Staging democracy through participation and co-authorship produced numerous mobile archipolitics, each vying for overall control and authorship of the exhibition. The purpose of 'theatocracy' is to stage this dissensual and anarchic rhythm in perpetuity.

These conclusions open up three further issues which extend beyond the scope of this paper and require further analysis. Firstly, if sustaining disagreement can usefully make power visible, what strategies can be usefully employed to help people embrace dissensus, rather than consensus, as heuristic mode? Short of the revolutionary overthrow of the neoliberal system, such an epistemic shift is difficult to imagine at the macro-level, even though it is quite conceivable within the temporary space of interventionist teaching strategy. Secondly, how can the deconstructive capacity of 'theatocratic' pedagogy be sustained, as end in itself, within the audit culture of a neoliberal educational apparatus obsessed by ends and metrics? Finally, if radical education must begin from the undercommons of the corporate university, must it always end there? Can the undercommons usefully infect the structures of these institutions, as entryist virus, if limited to time bound 'project' formats? Or, must it remain outside the neoliberal university, as absolute and irreducible alterity to its commodified, instrumental curricula?

Finally, we state 'theatocracy', as contestation to the 'police order' through the permanent staging of the democratic paradox, aims for a 'total redistribution of the sensible' (Rancière 2004). This constitutes democratic education as well as democratic politics. If it is possible to think of dissensus-as-learning-as-democracy, it is through the optics of otherness opened through the collapsed stage of 'theatocracy'. Here, the scandalous gesture of the undercommons enacts the 'ignorant one's lesson' via learning-as-democracy; the inclusive recognition of the 'part who has no part' in the task of translation. In its current usage, inclusion is the reified mantra of self-deluded officials and educators, who think they can act in the interest of debt-ridden students calibrated according to performance indicators. 'Theatocracy' radicalises inclusion as an intention that must be grounded in disagreement, indicating the form a democracy to come might take.

Fig. 4. ‘Messy Democracy’, installation view.

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