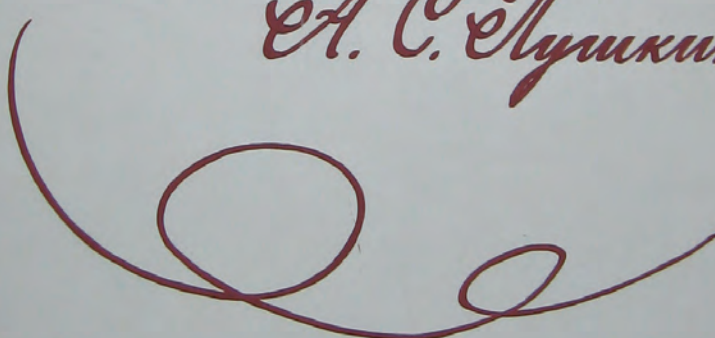


Путешествия
нужны мне
нравственно
и физически.

А. С. Пушкин.



EDUCATION ANNEX – “VV”

Leslie Johnson

Is there a particular art education for social practices? How can “real life” experiences be best utilized within the framework of formal education in the development of artworks?

Those were the main questions we brought with us into the research and development project Education annex – a project that the Valand School of Fine Art has operated in cooperation with the Centre for Problems in Contemporary art in Moscow.

Previous to the research project “Education Annex” the education at Valand has been evolving to support students working in different genres, and whose work is completed by the context in which it is shown. This evolution included emphasis on critical analysis of art history; philosophy and cultural theory studies, beside technical skills and studio time and an emphasis on expanded roles for artists.

Valand even has a summer course – “Bergsjön Public” – which is a collaboration between Valand, the Cultural association Bob in Bergsjön – a part of Gothenburg Suburbia, and a Masters program at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, one of only several masters programs in the US specialized in social practices.

Students in these summer courses worked with their observations from the neighbourhood developing “situation specific” works in the exhibitions concluding the courses.

Another effect of emphasis on context was examining criteria for art in the public sphere, and issues such as permanent versus transitory, product versus process were central within the school at the time we started this project.

Projects such as those which figured in Education Annex gave students, researchers, teachers the opportunity to consider the “study trip” and experiential learning process which has always been part of the art process, although the experiences have not always been provided by the institution.

The method for this was basically to organize two unfamiliar and diverse contexts for creating and showing new work and then invite a group of students from diverse educational backgrounds (the Institute for Problems in Contemporary Art in Moscow led by curator and director Joseph Backstein, the Städelschule in Frankfurt, Norwich School of Art & Design, California College of the Arts, Valand) teachers and researchers to participate.

* Text on image: I have a physical and moral need to travel. A. S. Pushkin

The Academic Dacha, “VV” (Vyshny Volochek)

The first part of Education Annex was in the tradition of working “en plein air”, which was especially popular in the 19th century when the Academic Dacha was established by the painter Ilya Repin and others as a retreat.

Education Annex provided the same opportunity, to respond to “the landscape” during gatherings for discussion and feedback but with no agreement of medium. Education for social practices is not always in a recognizable form as art education as it can in theory be as wide as the genres of expression. Our program at the Dacha, was actually a traditional platform of seminars and meetings, time for individual work; and only expanded into interacting with local resources; VV itself, a felt boot factory, nature surrounding the camp. At the same time all were glad to leave due to the weather and isolation. In Michel de Certeau’s *The practice of Everyday Life* there are observations on that which is below the surface in everyday life, that which normally glides by.

de Certeau’s essays as models for making these types of experiences possible to discuss as research for art works. Beside an affinity with “en plein air” tradition other fields come to mind such as archaeology or biology, which give students “field trip” opportunities to interact with the real world. Education Annex was an attempt to acknowledge the research period or material gathering from the world outside the studios or classrooms as an official part of the art education process. It could be therefore interesting in the future for art students to participate in the field trips of other disciplines.

A conclusion that could be drawn from VV is that this kind of experiment is most functional for artists who are at a point to question their role and practice, rather than those who are trying to consolidate their method or sources.

We had not reckoned to which degree the plan and situation itself: being at a Soviet style artist camp, the foreign art/hotel/electrician administration in presenting works in the second Moscow Biennale, would both undermine and enrich the projects.

Moscow Biennale

While the project designated two experiences, one on the periphery and one in the centre, elements of periphery and centre became intertwined in each segment of the project.

Our exhibition space for the Moscow Biennale, the centre, was at the Winzavod, a former factory for bottling wine. They were using the opportunity of the Biennale to develop the property for the new leisure class; as a centre integrating artists' studios, commercial galleries and high end shopping. In the same complex were exhibitions curated by a Lithuanian curator, an exhibition about Faith curated by Oleg Kulik and an exhibition curated by a New York gallery.

Our exhibition was here thanks to the collaboration with ICA and Joseph Backstein who was also the director of the Moscow Biennale. The designated space in the cellar was without electricity or much heat or air circulation, and difficult to clean much less hang an exhibition.

Photos began to curl in their frames in the damp rooms while we waited to be able to put hooks on the wall. This seemed trifling compared to organizing the space with absent artists (different working styles of young artists), and workers negotiating their own deals for lighting and installation.

Art exhibition as "Survivor" (Robinson).

On the part of the administration of the complex all complaints were pushed aside with the logic that this was an important event so everything must be good. A further aspect of this was that while curators were struggling to hang shows, elaborate receptions and *vernissages* were staged by large teams of carpenters and workers so that sponsors and their parties flowed through the Biennale, in different locations around town, with the art exhibitions struggling to meet the deadlines, as a backdrop to their celebrations.

In retrospect we could have just scrapped our plans for the show and made one piece about the politics of the space - real life at the centre.

What did they do?

In 1908 Ernest Shackleton made a mission to the South Pole. Still several 100 kilometres from their goal, the weather forced the group to turn back. If only he had started earlier in the season and been less tired. Shackleton was defeated but triumphant that he had come so near to being the first man to Antarctica.



On the way to Vyshtny Volochek the group arrived in Moscow on "Moscow day". It was said that the air force salted the clouds so that the weather would be perfect for this new holiday. We arrived in t-shirts and shorts, went swimming in the lake but from day 2 that changed into hail and cold rain. The group meetings and in-house meeting points were a lift in temperature both physical and mental and all students left with an experience, whether or not they reached their goal.



Photos: the bus from the airport to Moscow; arriving in VV, the dining car of the train leaving VV.

We explained the gathering of students, intellectuals, artists and organisers as a chance to gather impressions, information and experiment, which might lead to new works. But of course we could have done that at home. It definitely was not necessary to travel to Vyshny Volochek in order to get new impulses, where it was somehow both easier and more difficult for each artist to wait out the superficiality of the new and strange to recognise what was universal for them and to observe yourself doing just that in this new situation.



Photos: Different pedagogical styles: Joseph Backstein leading a morning seminar, Stanislav Shuripa having a lesson on Pushkin, another seminar, classic "en plein air", talking "en plein air, waiting "en plein air"





We had three meals per day at the dascha. The food was described to me as Soviet style, nourishing but thin soups, potatoes and potato cakes and buns with meat filling and vegetable salads. I liked the morning fluffy hot oatmeal with a luxury pat of butter. But all did not share an enthusiasm for the soviet diet and soon there were breakouts of caviar tasting and Göran Hassanpour invited us for a meal of oven pasta. Andreas Gedin made several food works. Video experiments included making a systematic video of each person saying something. Conny Blom documented paint drips "en plein aire" and Amy Sampson was shooting footage for an eventual horror film.

Michael (Staedelschule) lost his glasses. He could not get a new pair from home, so Maxim found an optometrist in VV. The new glasses cost about 10 dollars but the lenses were glass not plastic.

The students from Institute for Problems in Contemporary Art in Moscow came for a few days at a time. One artist from St. Petersburg heard that the camp was a way to get into the Biennale and he hitchhiked there for one night. He was in the main project.



We decide to make an excursion "within the excursion" to visit the Pushkin museum located in Torzhok, about 2 hours away on the camp bus. On the way there is a loud explosion. The driver pulls over and we file off the bus. A tyre blew out, but they are double tyres, so he decides we can continue. For a moment we are stuck in the periphery



In Moscow, we encountered a statue of Ilya Repin, one of the painters who founded the Academic Dacha in the 1890's. We too would make the transition from the Dacha to Moscow.



We visited a club/gallery with electricity and wall space which could have been the location for the Biennale exhibition. The decision to locate at Winzavod was based on the fact that other prestigious galleries and exhibitors had also decided for Winzavod and we would be more in the "centre". In the caverns of the centre.



What did I do?

Stepping outside the education on a "mission" everything became education. Arriving late to airport, checking into hotel, changing the money, figuring out the breakfast all slowly become lessons and paths into new projects.



I decided to go into VV with Maxim, one of Backstein's assistants who were handling the acquisition of the local visas. That process seemed to be taking forever, and I worried about getting the passports back before we left at the end of the week. But finally Maxim said that he thought we would be getting them that day, and at an un-inflated price. We went to the police office in VV to pick them up.

The building was unmarked but inside there was a deep hole in the wall where the door had opened repeatedly slamming the handle into the wall.

We were called from the waiting room into the office of the official, a woman in a tweed suit. And here was the interior style of the Dacha apartment complex perfected. Scratched and mismatched furniture, non-sequitars of electric wiring, cracked walls - but all clean and polished. Strategic lace doilies covered holes on the plaster windowsills and plants flourished, nurtured by strict routine.

A younger assistant bearing a less glorious version of her boss's tweed office wear carefully placed the pile of passports in front of her. She began a contemptuous monologue gesturing toward the passports, nails and rings flashing. She picked them up and then slapped them back on the desk punctuating the air with hand gestures while Maxim shrunk in his chair and murmured, *da, da*.

The office decor became understandable; every item was on its best behaviour in order to avoid exile. She flipped open a few passports pointed emphatically at some stamps and visas slamming them back onto the pile and then abruptly shoved them all over to Maxim. Shrunken, we exited murmuring *spa-seeva*. Outside, Maxim said, "It is as I thought, everything is fine."



Building a better world

I had my request to build a birdbath outside the studio translated into Russian and approached the head administrator of the Academic Dacha. She either didn't understand or tolerated the request. I wanted to put it in the place where the rain, pouring off the roof had eroded a hole and crevice into the ground. I wanted to act on the environment which was acting on us.

Accurately located the birdbath would protect the ground and ensure that the bath would be filled. I hoped no birds would be caught unaware, knocked out by the torrent of water. When in town dealing with the passport/visas I went to a local garden and hardware shop to buy some cement. It seemed very fine and powdery but Maxim, translating assured me it was just mix with water but said "The prices are quite high for a town like this." I improvised casting forms from scrap I found behind a building, and a wash basin. I hoped that planting perennials was not too optimistic.



Some of the students are living in the apartment building on the grounds of the Dacha where some of the administrators live. There is a dog chained outside who barks ferociously as we pass by. It is skinny and mean looking. The chain looks solid.

I am late to dinner and the lady insists on especially giving me extra chicken pieces but I can't eat them all, at the same time, don't want to reject her gift. I pick out the bones from the last pieces and walk over to the apartment building. The dog is barking and pulling at the chain. I toss the nourishment to him but he backs off whimpering as if I cast a stone. He doesn't recognize the food.

Administrative furniture: Moscow Biennale in the Lenin Museum, Academic Dacha main building, Valand School of Fine Arts reception.





Valand's theory teacher and two artists starting research projects are sitting on a bench. Perhaps they are discussing the morning's seminar or their projects. In the background: there are two artists from Moscow. One has taken the roll of model dressed in military uniform. He takes different poses and the painter quickly sketches on a canvas. It will be a large format tableaux and the one model will have posed for all the soldiers, even of the opposing army.

The project begins with a wide-angle photo featuring these two entries from "Encyclopaedia of Art Practises and Methods". In order to make a more dynamic composition the figures on the left are photoshopped to the right and the foliage is loosely cloned to fill out the picture. Students are invited to print out their photos on canvas for a group painting on canvas workshop. Everyone begins to experiment with overpainting and the possibility of submerging or leaving the photo. On the large canvas the foreground with the figures is overpainted, brush strokes becoming obvious so it reads as a painted photo varied with lyrical brush stroked grass, with the background emerging paint free in its photoshopped reality. The researchers and theorists are invited to work on the painting and one adds a drop of red oil on a stone.