
RESEARCH ESSAY

Crossbenching as a Form of Institutional Polity

Markus Miessen

HDK, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

markus.miessen@hdk.gu.se

When addressing the question of agency today, one needs to consider the ways participation and direct involvement can be thought of in regard to institutional engagement and, more precisely, the institution as not only an agency for critical inquiry but a platform for testing ideas. Such an institutional construct should be willing to invite a heterogeneous and polyphonic set of stakeholders, communities, and “users”—in other words, those who are interested in getting involved, and for whom the institutional platform becomes an enabler. To think of such a model also entails considering the role of the individual (or collective) as author and actor, especially in regard to what I would like to introduce as the “Uninvited Outsider.” This role can arguably facilitate new forms of communication and interaction between institution(s), audiences, and various (new) forms of publics.

The institutional platform I have in mind is one that acts as an experimental space in which ideas need not—by necessity, policy, or protocol—be fully formed. In this context, it is important to understand the parameters and frameworks that can shape, in terms of approach and content as well as physical structure, such an institutional platform and its relationship to its audience(s). Further, such a model should offer and enable the public to have agency, or something at stake, in terms of the institution’s reciprocal behavior. In this case, it is the institution’s responsibility to translate its program not only to its audience but to different (and potentially conflictual) publics, as each person, protagonist, or temporal activity will, by default, have their very own “publics.” Understood as both an intellectual practice and a social activity, the resulting institution acts, therefore, as a producer of social and physical form(s) and formats.

In his memoir *Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure*,¹ the American postmodern novelist Paul Auster clarifies his understanding of failure by stating that in his late twenties and early thirties he went through a period when everything he touched turned to failure. And as the British intellectual Colin MacCabe noted at a 2005 Tate Modern conference titled *The Value of Failure*, “Success has become one of the key terms by which people evaluate their own and others’ lives.”² When MacCabe refers to failure, he posits it as a crucial component of both the development of knowledge in science and creative experimentation in the arts. He ends by asking to what degree contemporary society demands success and what happens when in contemporary Britain (and indeed Europe) both public and private funding for projects in the cultural and educational sectors becomes increasingly success-oriented.

We always think of success as being “good” because it has become linked to prosperity. In MacCabe’s words, “Success dominates because of its part in the global evaluation of the good life in terms of money.” Hence, failure has become the unthinkable, the semantic confirmation of poverty. Looking at the current production of space, and indeed the art world, one contentedly realizes that creative production and failure come along as an inseparable couple. This may be true of almost any industry or economy. Yet it seems that, at least in current cultural discourse, the value of failure is being put forward as an alternative idea to success. Within such a regime of production, one might argue that the realization of “failure as the fundamental condition of surprise” is nothing new, but an interesting idea to build upon. Today, the primary issue that needs to be stressed is the fact that we have moved away, at least in creative production, from the reference model of the final product; fortunately, such a notion is often replaced by cultural laboratories in which the proto-product—in other words, the process towards X—and its failure is valued as knowledge production, and embodies precisely the laboratory for experimentation that provides challenging work.

¹ Auster, P. (1997), *Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure*. New York: Henry Holt.

² *The Value of Failure*, conference at Tate Modern’s Starr Auditorium, June 2005.

If one were to understand experimentation as a vital ingredient that contributes to the cultural gravitas of spatial production, one has to coercively admit to the value of failure. Hence, the societal norm of success as the only way forward needs to be reviewed.

Thinking about failure and conflict from the point of view of process, the most infertile situation that can occur is to let the fear of failure lead to inaction. It is the act of production that allows us to revise, tweak, rethink, and change. Along the lines of reinventing oneself, it also opens a space of uncertainty that often produces knowledge and content by surprise. If one's priority is to resist failure at all costs, the potential of surprise is never tapped into. This is why the results of certain investigations and inventions in many fields and disciplines have become predictable, and the outcome of a vast majority of creative and artistic output is both conventional and mediocre. To take a risk means to be incapable of preempting the outcome of an investigation. By consciously allowing a process to fail, one will open up the window of surprise, the moment where conflictual involvement and non-loyal participation produce new knowledge and politics.

In *Representations of the Intellectual*, Edward Said introduces the public role of the intellectual as outsider, as an amateur and disturber of the status quo. In his view, one task of the intellectual is the effort to break down stereotypes as well as the reductive categories that limit human thought and communication.³ Said speaks about intellectuals as figures whose public performance can neither be predicted nor reduced into a fixed dogma or party line. He clearly distinguishes between the notion of the intellectual and that of the insider: "Insiders promote special interests, but intellectuals should be the ones to question patriotic nationalism, corporate thinking, and a sense of class, racial or gender privilege."⁴ For Said, an ideal intellectual works as an exile and on the border, as an amateur, and as the author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power, rather than an expert who provides objective advice for pay.

This disinterested notion of what one could call the "uninvited outsider" is what I consider the most relevant of Said's writings in the context of my work. It puts forward the claim that universality always comes hand in hand with taking a risk. There are no rules. There are "no gods to be worshipped and looked to for unwavering guidance."⁵ By questioning the default mode of operation, which is clearly that of the specialist, the insider (the one with an interested agenda), Said writes of intellectuals as those who always speak to an audience and, by doing so, represent themselves to themselves. This mode of practice assumes that one operates according to an idea that one has of one's practice, which brings with it the intellectual duty for independence from external pressures. In underlining the role of the outsider, Said exposes the need to, at times, belong to a set and network of social authorities in order to directly effect change. This spirit of productive and targeted opposition, rather than accommodation, is the driving force for such a practice: to understand when to be part of something and when to be outside of it—to strategically align in order to make crucial decisions that would otherwise be made by others (most likely with a less ethically developed horizon).

Edward Said also illustrates that the role of the outsider is a lonely condition, and that it involves what Michel Foucault calls "a relentless erudition": "There is something fundamentally unsettling about intellectuals who have neither offices to protect nor territory to consolidate and guard."⁶ The uninvited outsider is someone who has a background within a particular (taught) discipline but ventures out of his or her milieu and immediate professional context, using a set of soft skills required elsewhere, and then applying them to found situations and problematics. According to Said, this person has a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced to a faceless professional; it is precisely the fact that one is operating without one's own professional boundaries that one can start to articulate concerns, views, and attitudes that go beyond the benefit of the individual or particular. On the one hand, it feels that there is a benefit in professional boundaries, expertise, and specific knowledge. On the other hand, one could argue that specific sets of parasitic knowledge can most generatively and productively apply to situations precisely when they are not based on disinterested principles. This is something that can emerge particularly when driven by "symbolic personages marked by their unyielding distance to practical concerns";⁷ driven by a consciousness that is skeptical and engaged, and devoted to moral judgment: "The independent artist and intellectual are among the few remaining personalities equipped to resist and to fight the stereotyping and consequent death of genuinely living things. Fresh perception now involves the capacity to continually unmask and to smash the

³ Said, E. (1996), *Representations of the Intellectual*. New York: Random House, xi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communications swamp us.”⁸ The intellectual should be neither understood as a mediator nor a consensus-builder but as “someone whose being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwillingly, but actively willing to say so in public.”⁹

In this context, it is necessary to raise a few basic but crucial questions: What language does one speak? Whom is one addressing? And from what position? There is no truth, only specific situations. There are responses to situations, and one’s speech or reaction should be modeled from these situations. Therefore, it is also a question of scale. It may be the case that a specific situation might lead to potential readings of larger bodies and relationships. Once the specifics are dealt with, one often easily understands the larger ramifications. In terms of communicating one’s message, it is essential to break away from one’s milieu—otherwise, one willingly reduces his or her audience to that of the already existing, most often the disciplinary crowd of one’s background (producing publics and audiences that would not convene without one’s practice). In the context of the uninvited outsider, “exile” can also be understood as a metaphorical condition, such as being an exile in other fields of expertise. Or as the saying goes: One cannot be a prophet in one’s own country.

Such exile can be understood as a nomadic practice, not necessarily driven by territorial shifts but one that sets a course that is never fully adjusted, “always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives.”¹⁰ According to Said, exile—as dissatisfaction—can become not only a style of thought but also a new, if temporary, habitation. Said further makes a claim for a kind of amateurism, an “activity that is fuelled by care and affection rather than by profit and selfish, narrow specialization.”¹¹ As a result, today’s intellectual ought to be an amateur, “someone who considers that to be a thinking and concerned member of a society one is entitled to raise moral issues at the heart of even the most technical and professionalized activity.”¹² Instead of simply doing what one is supposed to do, one can inquire about reasons and protocols. Practitioners in exile are individuals who represent not the consensus of the foreign practice but doubts about it on rational, moral, and political grounds. Questioning long-established agreements and consent, these outsiders can represent and work toward a cause, which might otherwise be difficult for those entangled in the force fields, power relations, and political relations of the context that the pariah enters. What is important to realize here is that Said deliberately emphasizes the need to be in some form of contact and relationship with the audience in order to effect change: “The issue is whether that audience is there to be satisfied, and hence a client to be kept happy, or whether it is there to be challenged, and hence stirred into outright opposition or mobilized into greater democratic participation in the society. But in either case, there is no getting around the intellectual’s relationship to them.”¹³ Knowledge and the production of knowledge are not fueled by accumulation but by editing and sampling. Or, as Jorge Davila argues about Foucault’s analytics of power, “to cut is to start something new—knowledge itself is a cut, a moment of rupture, a moment of exception driven by the moment of decision.”¹⁴ But like participation, critique itself can also become a form and force of normalization. Critique can be normalized and absorbed just as rebellion is being subsumed.

Let’s start with a hypothesis: As it seems increasingly difficult to produce meaningful content within the institutionalized structures of major universities and academies, an ethical and content-driven approach to producing new knowledge can only be achieved from the outside—through the setting up of small-scale frameworks that are nestled on the margins or borders. There are, of course, countless positive examples for such an approach, but it may still be worthwhile to outline the current situation by using an actual case.

As outlined in Beshara Doumani’s book *Academic Freedom after September 11*,¹⁵ the qualities of the academy, which are often taken for granted, have been exposed to a set of difficulties specifically after the September 11, 2001, attacks in the U.S. and, as a result, were endangered by a series of policy changes

⁸ Wright Mills, C. (1963), *Power, Politics, and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills*. ed. Irving Louis Horowitz, New York: Ballantine, 299.

⁹ Said, E. *Representations of the Intellectual*, op. cit., 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴ See Dávila, J. “Foucault’s Interpretive Analytics of Power,” *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, vol. 6, no. 4 (August 1993).

¹⁵ Doumani, B. ed. (2006), *Academic Freedom after September 11* (New York: Zone Books, 2006).

signed by the Bush administration. Although this is understood mainly as a U.S.-specific phenomenon, it has to be acknowledged that, in many universities around the globe, academic freedom and the notion of autonomous knowledge production has succumbed to a practice in which the academic “leader” is increasingly understood as no longer being a public intellectual but an administrator and fundraiser who—through the politically correct and consensual politics of the given institutional backdrop—becomes an income-generator for the university. Such an understanding fundamentally breaks from the idea of the academy as an external agent, uninterrupted by political and economic forces, and hence operating as a genuine center for intellectual production and a robust, democratic public culture. It poses the question of how one can relate and intervene in complex situations today, when the majority of time is actually being spent on administrative and fundraising purposes.

Allan Bloom’s prophetic book *The Closing of the American Mind*¹⁶—though now dated—proclaimed as early as the 1980s that there was too much democracy within American education, effectively arguing that the institution was leaving its direction to the students, who did not know what they did not know. Rethinking academic freedom first and foremost entails the introduction of a counterculture set against the recent processes through which the academy becomes more and more homogeneous, consensual, and at the same time hegemonic: “The commercialization of education is producing a culture of conformity decidedly hostile to the university’s traditional role as a haven for informed social criticism. In this larger context, academic freedom is becoming a luxury, not a condition of possibility for the pursuit of truth.”¹⁷ Today, more than ever before, one should base responsible (academic) practice on a skeptical approach toward professional norms. This is precisely what lies at the heart of what it means to be an academic. It claims the academy as a bastion or island of informed, independent, and alternative perspectives, a prerogative that emerges and should be able to thrive in a specific institutional context.

In Paul Hirst’s seminal 1995 essay “Education and the Production of New Ideas”, published in *AA Files*,¹⁸ he dismantles then British Prime Minister John Major’s rhetoric regarding the “cultural retreat with a defence of change.” Hirst argues, “Thus change is purely technical and economic, and our success in markets defines and circumscribes our modernity.” Hirst poses a relentless call for practitioners who are both willing to leave behind traditional modes of thinking and turn practice into a means of cultural and political involvement: “Above all, craft does not imply a retreat from the world, as do many of the academics who oppose the changes taking place within universities. If the university is to produce intellectuals capable of playing a role in political and cultural regeneration, it cannot afford to be cut off from the concerns of the people.” The academy should be able to offer a quasi-utopian space in which uninterested reflection, commentary, and research can be pursued. Such efforts should take place in either of these two ways: within an existing institutional academic body that, through its reputation and standing, is able to raise the necessary financial framework for the execution of the research itself, or through an oppositional educational model that is so small that no funding will ever disappear into the “black holes” and untraceable institutional channels of the university.

These topics of agency are prevalent in contemporary artistic practices and occupy its discourse as the field struggles with its place in twenty-first-century culture and education. In the March 2010 issue of *e-flux journal* co-edited by Irit Rogoff,¹⁹ for example, readers were exposed to a series of urgently needed positions and theses regarding a reevaluation of contemporary models of education, considering how forms of learning and exchange can take place within flexible, temporary, and unstable configurations:

All around us we see a search for other languages and other modalities of knowledge production, a pursuit of other modes of entering the problematics of “education” that defy, in voice and in practice, the limitations being set up by the forces of bureaucratic pragmatism: a decade of increasing control and regulation, of market values imposed on an essential public right, and of middle-brow positivism privileged over any form of criticality—matched by a decade of unprecedented self-organization, of exceptionally creative modes of dissent, of criticality, and of individual ambitions that are challenging people to experiment with how they inhabit the field, how they inhabit knowledge.²⁰

¹⁶ Bloom, A. (1988), *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988).

¹⁷ Doumani, op. cit., 38.

¹⁸ Hirst, P., “Education and the Production of New Ideas,” in *AA Files*, no. 29 (London: AA Publications, 1995).

¹⁹ Rogoff, I., ed., *e-flux journal*, no. 14, accessed at <http://e-flux.com/journal/issue/14>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, in Rogoff, I. “Education Actualized.”

Trondheim Academy of Fine Art professor Florian Schneider, who contributed to the *e-flux journal* edition referenced above, is one of the central protagonists when considering alternative models of collaboration. He further investigates the notion of disciplinarity and the problematic circularity that such an isolating and hermetic notion fosters: "It comes as no surprise that bodies of knowledge have been called 'the disciplines.' The disciplinary institutions have organized education as a process of subjectivation that reaffirms the existing order and distribution of power in an endless loop."²¹ In relation to my analysis of Said, Schneider argues for an urgent need to reevaluate the concepts of institutions and their opponents: "networked environments, deinstitutionalized and deregulated spaces such as informal networks, free universities, open academies, squatted universities, night schools, or proto-academies."²² He introduces the term "ekstitutions" to distinguish between the need for both organizing practices (ekstitutions) and un-organizing them (institutions) as a means to argue for an overdue concept of exclusivity: "By its very nature, the institution has to be concerned with inclusion. It is supposed to be open to everybody who meets the standards set in advance, while in ekstitutions admission is subject to constant negotiation and renegotiation."²³

Alternatively, another possibility is to set up externalized, small-scale structures that allow for a process of constant reform, as envisaged by Schneider's notion of the ekstitution. This issue of scale as a crucial mode of practice is also problematized in Nicolas Siepen and Åsa Sonjasdotter's *e-flux* contribution "Learning by Doing: Reflections on Setting Up a New Art Academy"²⁴ in which the authors distinguish two basic formats of education: state-run art institutions (or privately funded ones, for that matter) and so-called self-organized structures, between "pre-existing positions to be filled, and unstructured, continuously reinvented positions."²⁵

Given this framework, and to return to the hypothesis, it seems increasingly relevant to produce other formats of educational engagement, coupled with alternative (and alternatively curated) forms of learning. Structural change will most likely be achieved from the outside rather than inside. The small-scale frameworks nestled on the margins of state-controlled or privately funded education are more agile, flexible, and smarter in generating content-driven approaches, and they also create and participate in local projects as well as self-initiated collaborations. These are environments in which participants and contributors learn how to unlearn, to critically consider the differences between practice and professionalism, to develop a sociopolitical reading of their surroundings, and insert a criticality into the territory in which they operate. Nicolas Siepen and Åsa Sonjasdotter pose the crucial question much more effectively and clearly: "For whom or what reason is this institution here?"²⁶

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Information

Markus Miessen, architect, consultant and writer. Professor in Design, HDK, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

²¹ Ibid, in Schneider, F. "(Extended) Footnotes on Education."

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Siepen N. and Sonjasdotter, A. "Learning by Doing: Reflections on Setting Up a New Art Academy," in *e-flux journal*, no. 14, op. cit.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

How to cite this article: Miessen, M 2016 Crossbenching as a Form of Institutional Polity. *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research*, 1(2): 19, pp. 1–6, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/mjfar.20>

Published: 13 December 2016

Copyright: © 2016 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

 *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 