Inside the Black Box. Toward a Lower State of Futurity

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Where are the Pips, now that you need them?

'Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" host Regis Philbin to Gladys Knight [1]

The renewed fascination with Skinner boxes, Orwellian surveillance and utopian architecture comes from their obsolescence, an obsolescence of visions rather than practices. Thus, it is the very disfunctionality of the model (or the model of disfunctionality) that offers a reverse portal into the future, that is, a portal into a reverse future, a familiar field of half-sketched scenarios and skewed coordinates.

That every box is a Gestalt makes the box itself a paradigm for automatic processes. Ultimately, though, the box is just a housing for machinery: dancing machines, drum machines, love machines, desiring machines... People go for boxes – in fact, they turn them on (and vice versa) – because results are guaranteed. Machines are always social before they are technical. Their meaning is the use and tools that require skill are no good. Both subjects and objects of this process need not understand how it works. Moreover, it's best they don't.

Ultimately, it's important to believe that a human being, like a cybernetic system, can be programmed with stimuli that will trigger predictable responses. Just as B.F. Skinner designed his baby box to produce a perfect, utopian adept (his daughter), so a school, conversely, serves as a specially configured – and configuring – container. While schools ostensibly cultivate thought and analysis, the power of the school, as a Foucauldian regime, derives from an automatic internalization of social codes generated by its inherent structure.

In response to schools' regulatory function, Mike Kelley's 'Educational Complex' (1995) casts them as sites of reductive trauma, namely sexual abuse. This work, a foam-core architectural model, maps all the institutions where the artist studied onto one master complex," potent enough to rival any Oedipal register. Inside, Kelley reconstructed the various institutional floor plans from memory. Those rooms he could not recall, he claimed,

half-facetiously, were places where he'd been abused, places blotted out by repressed memory syndrome. Several years ago, similar appeals to victimhood swept Southern California. Besieged by a sudden rash of abuse cases, California courts came to treat repressed memory syndrome as acceptable evidence. Curiously, this was tantamount to legitimizing a lack of information – what simply might be called anti-evidence – as legally binding proof. Even more curiously, repressed memory syndrome offers a reciprocal version of Freud's simulacrum (based on the analysis of Dora), in which fantasies of abuse acquire the same psychological affect as real experience. Despite the hyperbolic tone of 'Educational Complex', Howard Singerman correlates it with the institutional regime of graduate art programs: 'Positioning the artist as both the object and subject of graduate training in art ... necessarily psychologizes and personalizes the critique; it is always ad hominem, always directed at the person, precisely to change and discipline her rather than her object or skills." In the U.S. system, however, the teacher's authority is not wholly unilateral. Administrators cancel classes that fail to meet minimum enrollment; the students can, in effect, vote with their feet. Thus, abuse notwithstanding, students and teachers lock into a system of mutual legitimation.

Eva Grubinger's 'Caught in Flux: flexibel.org' (2000-01) is an institutional work, commissioned not by an art school but by BSZ Tamsweg, a regional school center in Tamsweg, Austria. The school invited Grubinger to produce works that would reflect its progressive approach to education, i.e., one that not only prepares its pupils for the New Economy of flexible capitalism, but also one that construes this preparation as a process whereby one "never stops learning." She proposed four anamorphic murals, each for a different part of the school: the gym, the café, the entrance and the patio. All of these pictures are allegorical. Not only does their subject matter reflect aspects of the New Economy (an old man preparing to wrestle a younger adversary, a girl executing an almost impossible stretch at a ballet bar, etc.), but their distorted visual form also reflects the disjuncture between a nostalgia for stability and the apprehension arising from the mandate for constant growth.

The school's demand for perpetual education does indeed sound progressive, albeit in an old-timey way, reminiscent of the promise of automation in the affluent 1960s. Then, in at least one version of the future, automation itself would abolish work, leaving the masses

free to cultivate themselves as artists. In this scenario, the practice of art would synthesize work and leisure. At about the same time, and for similar reasons, Allan Kaprow argued (in 'The Education of the Un-Artist, Part II') that because the institution of art was rotting from the inside, the practice of art would give way to play. [2] Instead of refining the atavistic discourse of art, people would turn to more imaginative and flexible modes of play, inventing situations, not vocations. Yet, far from capricious diversions, the overriding goal for the serious artist, i.e., the integrated professional [3] , has become, ever more clearly, an inexorable self realization. Pierre Bourdieu pointedly expressed this non-naive, aesthetic capacity as "... the aptitude to be what one is: the social form of the principle of identity ..." [4] Taking the social clique as its subject, Grubinger's 'Cut-Outs' (1997) models this very process. The series comprises clusters of free-standing, silk-screened aluminium figures, reminiscent of paper dolls or cookie-cutter forms. Various insignias, attached to the figures with Velcro, register degrees of prestige within each group. The different cliques enact "the social form of the principle of identity" through a logic of relative inclusion and exclusion, integration and denigration. Prestige, as a kind of social competence, finds an even more explicit representation in Grubinger's board games, 'Hype!, Hit!, Hack!, Hegemony!' (1996). These she patterned on classic games like Monopoly or Labyrinth, but with more recent, particularized themes: art world politics, music biz sexism, internet outlaws and ideological contests. Here, then, one plays at self-realization through various matrices of social distinction. When Grubinger showed this work at the Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, one critic noted that 'Hype!' treated viewers to the macabre spectacle of art world insiders acting out versions of their otherwise real-life exploits. Just as the highest stakes within the art world, for example, are essentially symbolic (cultural capital), these games might focus the presumption of artifice more sharply on contestants within their designated social fields. Moreover, as Bourdieu has noted, the struggle for distinction is always nothing less than the struggle for symbolic life or death.

Through continuous education, the New Economy recuperates the goal of self-realization as a new condition of employment – not as a fixed occupation, but as an ever-unfolding employability. This recuperation sublates foregoing terms of alienation, bringing them close to a utopian principle. Henri Lefebvre conceived the old alienation in terms of role; one is, for example, a waiter, yet one is also always more than that. In short, one's unrealized potential always exceeds that of waiting tables. Here, the New Economy proves more

efficient than the old; it converts that otherwise wasted potential into yet more surplus value. Workers should now approach the job market in the spirit of a game – that is, provided they can afford the prerequisite schooling.

Just as the digital revolution has reconfigured the workplace, so too has it transformed the Panopticon machine. Of this, Jonathan Crary writes, "Most of the historically important functions of the human eye are being supplanted by practices in which visual images no longer have any reference to the position of an observer in a real optically perceived world." He goes on to argue that the observing body has become an increasingly better integrated component of new machines, economies and apparatuses that are social, libidinal and technological; its subjectivity arises from a precarious interface between rationalized exchange systems and information networks. [5]

In Grubinger's Tamsweg project, the observing body confronts its premature extinction. From most vantage points the murals are distorted, relatively abstract shapes, but seen from just the right spot, i.e., an oblique angle, they coalesce into normatively realistic pictures. Their anamorphoses triangulates the body of the viewer in public space. The viewing body, however, is not a nostalgic key to a subsequently self-evident picture puzzle but instead a capacity brought into being by shifting arrays of social forces. It is their anamorphic trick that distinguishes the murals from the currently dominant mode of critical public sculpture: which Walter Grasskamp says has devolved into simply a space for the narration of jokes. [6] Without the perspective that offers a compensatory locus for an increasingly virtual observer – or, more precisely, by offering a locus that is too skewed to be credible – Grubinger's pictures (though they officially represent an officializing institution) are essentially disjunctures, non-sites, ruptures in the day-to-day continuum of public life.

Given the tentative, yet stubborn nature of subjectivity, the question remains as to where the teleologies of self-realization (those of artists-as-professionals or professionals-as-artists) might be located. In this respect, even some of Skinner's most audacious pronouncements start to make an insane kind of sense. He believed, for example, that subjectivity is simply an effect of language, i.e., exchange. And the psyche itself was inconsequential. What counted was behavior, which could only be shaped by punishment and reward. Skinner's behaviorism, moreover, differed from Pavlov's in that it was

educational. Where Pavlov's "classical conditioning" rewarded only existent behavior, Skinner directed his "operant conditioning" toward shaping entirely new behavior. Not surprisingly, computer-based self-instruction largely relies on Skinner techniques. Vis-a-vis teaching and learning, discipline, rewards and punishment, Grubingers's 'Operation R.O.S.A.' (2001) appears as a direct outgrowth of the Tamsweg project. In this installation, one hears the voice of a young German woman named Rosa in the throes of an existential crisis. She recounts how her parents, both scientists once employed by the East German computer trust Robotron, hoped to create a better world through a special operant conditioning that synthesizes capitalist individualism and socialist egalitarianism. Looking back, their daughter now suspects that, to this end, they have covertly orchestrated much of her childhood and adolescence as an ensemble of controlled stimuli. In short, she may have unwittingly played the part of a guinea pig in their peculiar, utopian experiment. The troubled voice of Rosa goes on to describe how she found a rattle, once hers, in her parents' deserted house and passed it on to her own daughter. A video, projected on the wall in Grubinger's installation, shows a baby playing with this rattle. The projection is much larger than life. A replica, the same size as the projected rattle, is displayed in the same room. As an object in real space, its overly large scale is uncanny. The rattle has four abstract elements: a Moebius triangle, an inverted mushroom, a star and a honeycomb. The woman wonders what part these may have played in her life, whether they are not, in fact, hieratic emblems of a secret conspiracy. Most disturbingly, she asks whether or not, what she has all along experienced as her own free will was just an effect created by her parents.

This story of social engineering resonates with Skinner's novel 'Walden II' (1971), a parable of another utopia forged by behaviorist conditioning. In 'Operation R.O.S.A.', however, we view utopian longing through the lens of a defunct communism, from the vantage point of a state-of-the-art capitalism, namely post-unification Germany. Does the protagonist's burgeoning self-awareness only gratuitously coincide with the demise of a foregoing social system? In Mike Kelley's 'Educational Complex', repressed memory syndrome appears as a side-effect of the (sexualized) trauma of education. This trauma, although sometimes enacted, is essentially symbolic. Education comes to mean learning. In Grubinger's piece, the narrator remembers her past, but is not sure that it is entirely hers. The act of narration ordinarily serves to order experience; this young woman's experience has already been prefabricated by her parents. Their utopian aims link the technique of conditioning to the

notion of political economy, which is nothing other than an overarching system of rewards and punishments. Of course, the reality buttressed by ideology is always provisional. Here, one thinks of East German historians whose credentials evaporated overnight. The extreme form of their dislocation – the product of a conspiracy? – could easily take on the force of a paranoid reality. Ordinarily, those who espouse conspiracy theories represent cultic milieus, i.e., underground subcultures spurned by official authorities such as the church, the state, or the media. Because conspiracy theory is a tautological, self-fulfilling world view, it can reinforce even the most arcane and irrational belief structures. Grubinger's young, East German woman, however, wants into the mainstream, not out. She struggles to break the illusions she once accepted as reality. Or does she? In a simulated world, the word fiction is relative – what other reason would there be to conjoin it to science? Philip K. Dick would be the first to remind us of that. As for a course of action, Jean Baudrillard's rejoinder to Sartre is still the most apt: "Man is not free not to choose."

John Miller

1 Howard Singerman, 'Toward a Theory of the M.F.A.', 'Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University' (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1999), p. 211.
2 For his 1968 retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum, Kaprow tar-papered the exhibition spaces, thus creating a black box of his own. His aim was to make the museum seem less "holy."
3 The term is drawn from Howard S. Becker's 'Art Worlds' (Berkeley:University of California Press, 1983).
4 Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods', 'Media, Culture, and Society 2', No. 3 (July 1980): p. 292, quoted by Singerman, 'Toward a Theory of the M.F.A.', p. 212.
5 Jonathan Crary, 'Modernity and the Problem of the Observer', 'Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century' (Boston: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 2.
6 See Walter Grasskamp, 'Art and the City', 'Contemporary Sculpture: Projects in Münster 1997', ed. Klaus Bussmann (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997).