

FOUR DECADES OF THE INDEPENDENT STUDY PROGRAMMES

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Class of MACBA's Independent Studies Programme (PEI) with Xavier Antich, MACBA Study Center, October 2010

The emblematic, indeed almost foundational, beginning of the Independent Study Programmes (ISP) lies in activities that took place at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. In the field of art studies, the history of these programmes is inseparable from a certain moment in theory and politics that took shape in the seventies. In retrospect, it hardly seems an overstatement to compare the influence of these programmes on the sphere of education in art, theory and politics to the influence exercised by the workshops at the Vkhutemas, a school founded in the Soviet Union in the twenties.

In any case, what was perhaps most essential to the process that got underway at that time was – if it is possible to formulate it in these terms – a double impugnation and, hence, a double proposal. First, there was awareness of the irreversible nature of the rupture between stagnant categories of artistic practice, on the one hand, and critical reflection and theory, on the other. Different strains of conceptual and political art had already introduced what would eventually give rise to a new sort of practice that would not await later conceptualisation or theorising. That practice is – and defends the right to be – a theory of itself, a formulation of its own meanings, and indeed the meaning of artistic practice in general and its social dimension. These new tendencies would end up wholly altering the nature of Fine Arts Studies almost everywhere. Second, there was an equally irreversible awareness of the fact that academic studies in art history and museum practices were undergoing a sort of deforestation; attention was shifted away from them and focus was now placed on defining new tendencies in artistic practice, a fact that forced a reformulation of staid academic studies of art histories. This was, then, the two-fold context in which Independent Study Programmes began their experiment.

At present, it is evident that the history of Independent Study Programmes is intrinsically linked to the evolution of critical thought. It is not surprising that the Whitney's ISP in the seventies revolved around theoretical concerns related to semiotics, post-structuralism, feminism and Marxism that gave a specific meaning to the 'theoretical turn' on which Independent Study Programmes were based. Thus, in their commitment to rejoining theory and artistic practice and in the need to construct a space outside the realm of institutional and academic knowledge (from which these programmes affirmed their 'independence') and outside their organic burdens, Independent Study Programmes had an educational component more focused on producing knowledges at the intersection of forms of practice than on conveying knowledge.

Four decades after their launching, Independent Study Programmes everywhere are still struggling to define the nature of their 'independence' and the production of knowledge to which they are, more or less intensely, committed. The Whitney programme, for instance, now involves three interconnected, though conceptually differentiated, programmes: the Studio Program, the Curatorial Program and the Critical Studies Program. The design of other programmes is less conventional and perhaps more demanding from an epistemological perspective: the modest programme at the Escola de Artes Visuais Maumaus (Lisbon), for instance, and mostly the newer Campus Expandido programme of the MUAC (Mexico), which reaffirms the urgent need to rethink the museum as, among other things, a sphere for the production of critical knowledge. MACBA's Independent Study Programme (PEI) formally began in January 2006 (on the basis of activities that had been taking place for the previous five years). It emerged within the context of the reformulation of independent study programmes, an attempt to find a new place for these programmes in the face of the new challenges generated by cognitive capitalism and the onset of a new wave of discourses that openly encouraged assimilating any and all cultural experience into consumerism. Just like the 'theoretical turn' that had been explicitly and radically assumed when these programmes emerged four decades earlier, the re-politicisation of educational practices in the arts, as well as the need to reformulate the social dimension of those practices, constituted a deeply rooted attempt to find a new meaning for Independent Study programmes that aspired to continue to be independent' from the aforementioned challenges.

A series of initiatives and activities (lectures, seminars and courses) that took place before the launching of MACBA's PEI served to define the various conceptual, theoretical and practical approaches that would eventually constitute its framework. This was an attempt to open reflection and research on artistic practice to the sphere of theory and the criticism of discourse that emerged on the basis of post-structuralism, gender technologies in critical feminism and queer theory, psychoanalysis and therapy,

different forms of political imagination connected to social and political activism, the study and analysis of urban transformations and processes, and the criticism of the economy of culture. On all of these fronts, MACBA's PEI worked with academics and university professors, artists and curators, theorists and cultural critics, as well as different actors involved in social and political activism, local movements, educational reform, and museum-related work and research. It was on the basis of these efforts and alliances that, in 2006, MACBA launched its Independent Study Programme, the first of its kind in Spain. From the very beginning, the programme received the support it was due from a museum that wanted to make knowledge, research and the production of discourse the core of its practice.

Just as, in the early phases, Independent Study Programmes evolved alongside cultural studies – especially those related to visual culture, feminist, subaltern and critical theory in general–, recent reflection on the development of the 'independent' nature of these programmes necessarily entails evaluating to what extent they have caused academic programmes in leading universities to evolve. This can be analysed, to a certain extent, by looking to, for instance, the Master of Arts Program in Curatorial Studies at Bard College (New York); the Master of Science in Visual Studies at MIT's Program in Art, Culture and Technology (Cambridge, MA); the Master in Modern Art: Critical & Curatorial Studies (MODA) at Columbia University (New York); the Curatorial Practice Program & Visual and Critical Studies at California College of Arts & Crafts (San Francisco); and, in Europe, the post-graduate programmes at Goldsmiths College at the University of London and the Royal College of Art (also in London), the Critical Studies programme at the Malmö Art Academy (Lund University, Malmö), Kunstraum at the University of Luneburg (Germany) and the curatorial programme at the De Appel Arts Centre (Amsterdam).

While this is not the place to draw conclusions about the dialogue that has taken place in recent years between Independent Study Programmes and academic programmes, it is possible that, given the relative uniformity of these programmes (even in terms of their names), it is still somewhat pertinent to question from what 'place' these spaces for the production of knowledge define themselves. And perhaps for this reason it is not farfetched to rethink the privileged place occupied by New York as the 'city' in the early years of Whitney's ISP. If Independent Study Programmes today, as always, have to rethink their task, that first of all should imply knowing where they stand, a question that in turn implies, among other things, defining – by problematising it in a dialectical manner – the place of enunciation to which the processes of subjectivation that they mean to promote are committed, as well as the social and public sphere to which they aspire. And that seems no small thing.