

Anarchy in the ruins: dreaming the experimental university

By Nicholas Mirzoeff

Imagine for a moment that you do not know what a university is—or more exactly what it might have been. Imagine that you set aside all the reams of boilerplate and platitude produced by today's universities in search of a purpose for themselves to ask yourself what a university will have been by the time this exhibition is over. The future perfect—the 'will have been'—is the tense of the ghost, which will have returned. The ghost in this case is precisely the imagined university that haunts the ruins of the university as it is today.ⁱ The late Edward Said used to declare that the university was the last utopia in Western society. The slightest glance at any report by a senior university official will quickly make it apparent that no hint of utopia remains, with its language of incentivizing the faculty, naming students as customers and claiming the benefit of the institution to be its function as an economic multiplier. Did that utopia simply evaporate to join the long list of unfulfilled millenarian dreams? The new 'realism' among university administrators would say so, but this exhibition suggests otherwise. For as the ghost of the university continues to return, it demands that we consider that the university is in fact yet to come. The utopian university is not the ghost in the machine but rather, as Deleuze and Guattari might put it, it is a machine. This machine produces knowledge, not information, and there is a difference. This university-machine did not die but has become dispersed into the expanded field: beyond the museum, beyond the lecture hall and into everyday life. Experience the intervention of the experimental university and realize that the dream was not necessarily about those places with the name university on the door. The existence and emergence of utopian spaces to eat, live, dream and imagine takes place in-between the ruins of the museum and those of the university. It is not a revolution. It is a moment of clarity.

Instead of thinking of the university as a locus of national policy by which the elite recruits new members, perhaps it might be a place in which people encounter each other. This sideways encounter is inspired by the German writer and critic Walter Benjamin's vision of the Arcades, the nineteenth-century covered iron-and-glass arena for shopping, strolling and perhaps above all observation. Benjamin took this social and architectural innovation and transformed into what he called a dream-image. The dream-image expressed his sense that the Arcades were an especially important site in which people were trying to dream the future into being. Taking Said's sense of the university as a utopia seriously would make it the 20th

century equivalent of this dream, trying to create tools, images and ideas for the 21st century. Of course, this kind of rhetoric is close to that used by universities themselves with their insistent claims to prepare people for the future and improve the world we live in. Said's view was far more expansive than the narrow socio-economic amelioration now offered to students and their parents in exchange for their ever rising tuition fees. This university might be a place of emancipation, rather than instruction, formed by critique rather than the transfer of information. The emancipated university was not accomplished in the past but dreamed by it. Like the Arcades, it was a vision of the refiguring of social space or, more exactly, the rendering of space such that its social nature becomes apparent. That is to say, there is no such thing as empty space because all space, or the sensation of space, is socially produced.

Unlike the Arcades, the university is a space of production rather than consumption, in short a machine. Here is the connection with contemporary art, which Sarat Maharaj has called a form of knowledge production. In this view, the distinction between the university (each with its own museum) and the museum (each with its own education department) is getting productively blurred. In this interface of artwork, museum and university, knowledge is produced as a dream of an emancipation that is yet to come. The emancipated university in the expanded field is, then, a dream machine.

There is much work to be done in developing this idea. Let's begin with the question of emancipation. Emancipation is the legal or biological process by which a minor attains status as a subject. To be emancipated, one might come of age; or be set free from bondage in slavery or indentured servitude; or have the legal burdens of civil disability set aside, such as those prescribed against Jews and other minorities in European nations prior to the French Revolution. In short, emancipation is an act of what French philosopher Michel Foucault called "biopower," the intersection of life with power. Biopower sets the age at which one attains subject status at 30, 21 or 18; figures the "age of consent" to sexual relations; renders certain forms of sexual practice not just illegal or immoral but as a separate species, such as the "homosexual"; permits children to be tried "as adults"; determines what forms of embodiment are "disabled" and which are not, and so on. In the European Enlightenment, the philosopher Immanuel Kant answered the question posed by a German newspaper "What is Enlightening?" as emancipation, or "Man's quitting the nonage occasioned by himself." Nonage was

the legal state of minority which required emancipation. In Kant's instance "Man"—by which he normally means the white, male, European, free, able-bodied Gentile—is able to emancipate himself by the public use of Reason. The difficulty inherent in this concept of emancipation is that Reason has also been used to create the barriers to its enactment for those people who did not fall into the category of "Man."

To make an assertion that will perhaps seem too quick, the experimental university would be a space for a collective and interactive deployment of criticism and other modes of inquiry that is not circumscribed by this limited definition of the human. In discussing Kant's essay on Enlightenment, Foucault argued that criticism was now to be framed as "a historical investigation of the events that have led us to constitute ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying.... But if we are not to settle for the affirmation or the empty dream of freedom, it seems to me that this historico-critical attitude must also be an experimental one."ⁱⁱ By this, Foucault meant that such projects must be local and specific rather than seek to create the "new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century." The empty affirmation of freedom is all around us at present even as its local and specific forms seem to be under consistent and widespread erasure. In the context of art and visual culture, there is a notable omission from Foucault's definition of the activities of the subject: seeing. His work built on the theory of the "interpellation" of the subject, developed by his colleague Louis Althusser in 1960s Paris. Althusser described interpellation, or hailing, as something "which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing 'Hey, you there!'"ⁱⁱⁱ When we respond to that call by looking round or asking "do you mean me?" we recognize our interpellation. This recognition is the means by which an individual locates itself in time and space. Inherent in that little moment is also a visual surveillance that leads to a moment of detection or recognition. The actions of the subject are suspicious but their actions clearly exist. Rather than an exchange between individuals on foot, as presumed in Althusser's theory of interpellation, his former colleague Jacques Rancière has recently argued that the modern anti-spectacle now dictates that there is nothing to see and that instead one must keep moving, keep circulating and keep consuming: "The police are above all a certitude about what is there, or rather, about what is not there: 'Move along, there's nothing to see.'" One of the new camps for migrants or refugees concealed in a remote area of the countryside is a good example of this object of visibility which is there and not there at once. The police are not just the uniformed officers of the police force but what Foucault called "an administration heading the state, together with the judiciary, the army and the exchequer." Contrasting this generalized sense of the police with the practice of politics, Rancière continues: "the police say there is nothing to see, nothing happening, nothing to be done, but to keep moving, circulating; they say that the space of circulation is nothing but the space of circulation. Politics consists in transforming that space of circulation into the space of the manifestation of a subject: be it the people, workers, citizens. It consists in reconfiguring that space,

what there is to do there, what there is to see or name. It is a dispute about the division of what is perceptible to the senses."^{iv} Insofar as that dispute concerns the visual, necessarily interfaced with the other senses, this politics of bringing the subject into presence in space is visual culture. For when the police say there is nothing to see, they are not telling the truth nor are we supposed to infer that they are. Rather they mean, "while there is something to see, you have no authority or need to look at it." By being simply a citizen, one does not necessarily attain the full authority of the visual subject, the person who is allowed and required to look in all circumstances.

In the experimental university, new forms of looking are being enacted that would allow for the formation of visual subjects in the new spaces of globalization, with or without the permission of the police. With the Atlas Group, we look into the archive of the Lebanese civil war of 1975-1991 that seems to be a precursor to much of the current dramas of terrorism. The Atlas Group is described by Walid Ra'ad as "an aesthetic and cultural laboratory." The archive offered presents film, photography, documents and commentary but Ra'ad adds: "It is important to note that some of the documents, stories, and individuals I present with this project are real in the sense that they exist in the historical world, and others are imaginary in the sense that I imagined and produced them." All pertain to making the situation in Lebanon visible and imaginable. But the interweaving of creative and documentary material places the viewer in a far more active position than that of a simple witness or consumer. In making this "division of what is perceptible to the senses", the viewer becomes a visual subject. But whereas the ordinary university accomplishes these tasks based on a comfortable guarantee that the information offered is true in common sense terms, the Atlas Group Archive makes us question how and why archives come into being. Knowledge is here as much a problem as an answer.

Clearly this work is political but it is not politics as we have become accustomed to it in American art of recent years. Interestingly some very different critics like TJ Clark and Sarat Maharaj have recently called for a reconsideration of anarchism, the space between the artist and Duchamp's "anartist."^v Clark has gone so far as to say that socialism's epistemic crisis began with the break with anarchism in the 1890s, for which he has been soundly critiqued by scandalized Marxists in wealthy private universities. To look at 1890s anarchist concerns with race and racism, ecology and the politics of food, prison reform, and a decentered political system^{vi} is to get a shock of Walter Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* (the time of the now). Anarchy also recalls the fashion, music and politics of 1970s punk that are again visible in suburban streets.^{vii} So to think of anarchism is not to disavow mass political action because that is the exception to everyday life, as in the recent anti-war demonstrations that were mobilized from people's houses via the internet. That action was anarchist, in the sense of a political action committed out of the sight of the police. It is closer to the anarchist trend within modern criticism that runs from Oscar Wilde and Camille Pissarro in

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the 1890s to the “theocratic anarchism” of the young Walter Benjamin in Weimar Germany, the Situationists of the 1950s and 60s and many contemporary strands of theoretical practice, perhaps especially those connected with the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. This is not to suggest that the artists here should simply be thought of as anarchists because many of them would disagree. At the same time, it is not to adhere to the violence committed as “anarchism.” The point is to bring that strand of concern with the politics and practice of everyday life that was addressed by anarchism, and often overlooked by other forms of the political, back into the practice of the experimental university.

The possibility of an experimental university has emerged in considerable part thanks to the emergence of digital culture. Computer technology blurs the distinction between amateurs and professionals and threatens to make information available as simply as photography did for the image. It is intriguing in this context to recall that Eric Raymond’s famous essay “The Cathedral and the Bazaar,” one of the classic texts of digital culture, concludes with a passage from Peter Kropotkin’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. Raymond’s essay highlights the creative possibilities of “open-source” programming using the Linux operating system with the top-down, all-controlling in-house system (implicitly that of Microsoft). After hailing the “bazaar” of open source as superior to the “cathedral” of in-house (and without addressing his own Orientalism), he turns to Kropotkin. Kropotkin had turned away from a career as a government reformer to that of a radical and revolutionary in Tsarist Russia of the 1860s. He had witnessed what he considered the failure of government-led reform in Siberia, while gaining a devotion to the peasants and ordinary people that was to shape his subsequent career. The passage cited by Raymond turns on Kropotkin’s reflecting on his life within a serf-owning family—a serf being a person “owned” by a landowner as the labor for that land—only to then experience emancipation in 1863. Having lived through this emancipation, Kropotkin came to “appreciate the difference between acting on the principle of command and discipline and acting on the principle of common understanding. The former works admirably in a military parade but is worth nothing where real life is concerned, and the aim can be achieved only through the severe effort of many converging wills.”viii That effort of many converging wills was what sustained the anarchy of the internet before it was reined in by Microsoft and AOL. Seen more broadly, it is perhaps the first theory of everyday life as a form of resistance and as an alternative to centralized power, for all its nineteenth-century baggage of “civilization” theory. More widely still, this is the ethos of the experimental university. Indeed, Kropotkin used museums and libraries as examples of the principle of “to every person according to their needs.”ix

Yet needs can be met in a variety of ways. Discussing the growth of public kitchens in the 1890s, Kropotkin shuddered that “to make a duty of taking home our food ready cooked, that would be as repugnant to our modern minds as the ideas of the convent or the barrack.”x By connecting mass-produced food to the disciplinary institutions of church and state, Kropotkin linked everyday life to power through the basic means of subsistence. It has recently been estimated that 10 corporations supply over half of all the food and drink consumed in the United States. The number of people now working

as farmers is less than one per cent of the working-age population, for all the endless evocation of the needs of farmers by the governing class. When they say “farmers,” hear “agri-business.” Now that nearly all but the most dedicated of us take home our bread ready cooked, Critical Art Ensemble with Beatriz de Costa plan to make us reexamine that connection by testing loaves for the presence of genetically modified grains. We are told that these are safe. Exactly what knowledge will be produced by this experiment is unclear. This is the difference between an artistic experiment and a scientific one that is created to demonstrate a theorem. It challenges the cosiness of the “museum visit” with its promise of quiet viewing, rewarded by a visit to the gift shop and café. In the experimental university that has taken its place, it remains to be seen what happens next. The point at which this will start to get interesting will be when the artist-educator loses the edge of surprise over the experimental student. Learning curves are very short these days.

The cybernetic hope of anarchic freedom implied in Raymond’s citation of Kropotkin had already been imagined as a cityscape by the Situationist architect Constant in the 1960s. He called it “New Babylon.” A Dutch painter who had come to abandon art in favor of the new practice of urbanism, Constant has a good claim to have invented the strategy of the situation. Inspired by his vision of a mass culture freed from the routine of subsistence labor by cybernetics, Constant imagined that automation would generate huge amounts of “so called free time.” Rather than think of this time as “leisure,” Constant and the other Situationists were inspired by the Dutch historian Johann Huizinga to think of it as play and to consider play as freedom.xi In elaborating his theory of New Babylon, Constant quoted the cybernetic theorist Norbert Weiner who “compares the electronic machine to the imported slaves of antiquity.” This new emancipation from the necessity to work would be for all, rather than the minority supported by slavery. It will generate “unprecedented freedom, an undreamt-of opportunity for the free disposal of time, for the free realization of life....The freedom won as a result of the disappearance of routine work is a freedom to act,” which he called the “lived work of art.” In this society, traditional forms of art would be revealed as a “surrogate” for this kind of freedom.xii New Babylon was to be the site of “the real practice of freedom—of a ‘freedom’ that for us is not the choice between many alternatives but the optimum development of the creative faculties of every human being.”xiii Freedom was not to be seen either as an absence of constraint or as the self-enobling choice among variables which is presented by American apologists today but as the possibility to play.

Constant envisaged New Babylon as a world without frontiers, that he called “a camp for nomads on a planetary scale.” Rather than an exclusionary camp that seeks to detain and deport the nomad, like the new detention camps for migrants and refugees created in the European Union, Australia and the US borderlands, New Babylon opened a space for them to play as they chose without having to become settled to do so. This new cityspace was inspired by the old Babylon of the ghetto and marginal space: “these areas of the historical cities, where the outcasts of the utilitarian society stick together, these poor quarters where racial minorities, artists, students, prostitutes, and intellectuals are living together.”xiv The subRosa group creates maps of cities from alternative points of view

in the hope of forming a refugia, an actually existing New Babylon. In this case, they will have traced the spaces in North Adams that connect gender and production, looking at the ways in which MoCA itself is housed in a former factory. It is going to be controversial because gender is always troubling. Their project is exemplary of the experimental university that is yet to come. It has clear links to art and politics of the past but tries to create a new future. But that new future is not a calm utopia but a place where ideas, identities and knowledges are troubled, rather than reinforced. The risk is that knowledge production simply becomes knowledge commodification. It is in that space between the museum and the everyday that the experimental university tries to establish itself. Both museums and universities have sought to evade the charge of elitism by organizing themselves to appeal to ever larger numbers of people. The blockbuster show is in this sense of a piece with on-line courses, part-time degrees and the promotion of life-long learning. If there is to be a cultural and political significance to this expansion beyond the simple pursuit of numbers, then the challenge of anarchism, experimentation and utopia presented by this show will have to be faced. 17

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- i See *Bill Readings*, *The University in Ruins*, although it should be noted that while I concur with Readings’ critique of the contemporary university in general, I do not agree with some of his specifics, notably in regard to cultural studies.
- ii Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in Herbert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (eds.), *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984, 46).
- iii Louis Althusser, *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984), 48.
- iv Jacques Rancière, from *Aux bords de la politique*, 2nd revised edition (Paris, 1998) 177; quoted and translated by Kristin Ross, *May ’68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 22-23.
- v See T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 103; and Sarat Maharaj, “Xeno-Epistemics: Makeshift Kit for Sounding Visual Art as Knowledge Production and the Retinal Regimes,” in *Documenta 11*, Platform 5: The Exhibition (Ostfildern-Ruit [Germany]: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), 71-84.
- vi See Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings*,. Ed. Marshall S. Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969); Kropotkin, *In Russian and French Prisons*.
- vii These connections evoke the wonderful book by Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A secret history of the twentieth century* (Cambridge Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1990).
- viii Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), 216. Cited without reference by Eric S. Raymond, “The Cathedral and the Bazaar,” at http://firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_3/ramond/ accessed on 10/13/03.
- ix Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread and other writings*, ed. Marshall S. Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1892] 1995), 33-34.
- x Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, 65.
- xi J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (London: Routledge, Kegan, Paul, [1940] 1980), 8.
- xii Constant, “Unitary Urbanism” (1960), rpr. Mark Wigley, *Constant’s New Babylon: The Hyperarchitecture of Desire* (Rotterdam: Witte de With/010 Publishers, 1998), 133.
- xiii Constant, “New Babylon: Outline of a Culture,” written 1960-65, rpr. in Wigley, *Constant’s New Babylon*, 160.
- xiv Constant, unpublished lecture of 1964, quoted in Wigley,