Conceived initially as an expanded seminar Radical Love took the form of a 3 day 2 night camp in Blessington Co.Wicklow, Ireland. The event, organized by Joseph Noonon-Ganley and Sam Keogh, was based around the agenda of committing to an exchange, discussion, gift or participation, whereby ones normal rules/senses are put on hold or put into a ‘state of exception’. Radical Love required its participants to live together for the duration of the camp. This created a rupture to everyday life, in a way that a standard seminar does not, requiring a decidedly unprofessional approach to the presentation of critical thought. The standard form of an event for the presentation of ideas (be it as exhibition/lecture/seminar/gig/party/protest etc.) occupies a tidy temporal pocket which can be tagged onto the end of a working day. Radical Love proposed a break in this routine and an antidote to the latent hierarchies, fashions and alienating tendencies of contemporary discursive fields which fail to deliver on their promise of inclusion.

At Radical Love the Provisional University gave the first public presentation of their autonomous education project. Here they reflect on the experience of Radical Love and the themes which link that and their own concerns. In the process they provide some thoughts on autonomous education, institutions and conflict.

We arrived at Radical Love with a certain amount of trepidation. All that we knew was that we were committing to live with strangers in a context impossible to imagine beyond the vague and unsettling sense of something ‘art-based’. Over the following two days this initial trepidation disappeared. The most obvious and necessary way this came about was through collective and generalised participation. Each partook in the venture, in the experiment, in any number of ways that were never made equivalent, never made commensurate, that is understood through a single, external measure. It was not determined by the time we spent washing up, the grades we gave papers, the amount of wood collected for the fire. Each participated equally, that is according to their capacity and desire.

We want to pick out a number of elements from the experience which were particularly important for us, and resonated with some of the events we’d organised previously. After a series of seminars we organised in Seomra Spraoi towards the beginning of 2010, we were left with the sense that the seminar format left something to be desired, namely the element of re-subjectivisation. This is something everyone has experienced: a sense that nothing really happened, not many new connections were made. Later on we decided to organise something a bit more experimental. Inspired by the notion of ‘machine’, we tried to imagine how we could put together a series of elements (human, technological, discursive, visual) which might open up subjective possibilities and make way for unplanned connections. We were partially successful. But it was at Radical Love we first began to see how such an encounter might work. There were a number of elements to this.

On arrival you immediately felt part of something. You weren’t at an event, you were the event. If you didn’t listen there would be no paper, if you didn’t take part there would be no performance, if you didn’t put the kettle on there would be no tea. You were activated. Participation was a taking part, but never a claim or an ownership of a part, of a given role or function. No one was prevented from speaking or acting because of their position. All brought their skills and knowledge, a paper presented, a performance, a flag, food, humour, questions, but none belonged to any single individual. While each person brought their capacities, realised them in some way, what emerged could not be said to belong to anyone. This is the basis of the commons: something that cannot be instituted or measured from outside the situation in which it is found. The commons establishes the presence of an unspoken equality that exists as the precondition for all who participate.
Taking part in this living community, this commons, what quickly became clear was how a different social relationship emerged. Firstly, the porous boundary between papers, performances and conversations made possible unexpected and multiple connections. The diversity of forms and spaces of participation made possible a multiplicuous participation. Arising from this, the event operated an axiomatic equality which seemed to silently structure the whole experience. Under the tarpaulin, as by the fire, or in the water, there was a suspension of hierarchy. Because there were no clear distinctions, between art and academia, between living and working, between here and there, there could be no way of distinguishing those who could and those who couldn’t. Elsewhere such distinctions are carried in the very fabric of the encounter- teacher speaks and student listens. The demands created by such pre-determined encounters are internalised. They determine what you say and how you act. But everyone knows that these prescriptions can be broken. That people can teach when they are not teachers. At Radical Love, in the absence of any set positions, there was no way of discriminating, no way of establishing the ‘normal’ hierarchy that subsists in institutionalised occasions of creativity. Being part of a living commons requires no qualification except participation through a common concern. To live like this creates demands: to share space, food, time with strangers; to spend hours under a tree listening attentively; to fetch water and carry wood. In the end we left exhausted. But these demands are shouldered by everyone. The demands of living in common create a space where the only measure is the common concern, the care of the commons. A commons means more than the absence of private or public, it means the absence of a measure that can discriminate between those that can and those who can’t.

There was more to the event than a ‘free space’. The commons comes together through a common concern. But what was the concern? That we sat and listened to each other through the heat of an afternoon raises the question, often not raised, of how this could happen, what strange perversion led a group of young people into a field to learn from one another? To begin with such an event could not have taken place in any existing institution under normal conditions. It would not have been possible to dissolve the boundaries, to legislate for such creative ambiguity. We could say the field became a space because it was created by an excess of desire, of knowledge, of creativity, that could not find expression, sufficient expression, within any other existing settings. In a sense it was a flight, an escape, not from the city, but from the incessant bureaucracies of our time. This subtraction from the state of affairs is not just an objective one, a physical migration, but an imperceptibly political one. Taking politics in Ranciere’s terms to mean a refusal or a break with the given distribution of roles and functions, the governing sensibility that says knowledge takes place here and not there, that says young people are passive and disinterested, that students are hedonistic, their roles prescribed as the narrow passage from school to university to work, we can say that Radical love was a short, sharp instance of this negation: a strange anarchic assembly gathered through a stuttering refusal.

The excessive element of radical love, the fact of its happening, its form, reveals the ever present potential that exists. To think of desire as always spilling out beyond the reaches of capital or bureaucracy allows us to re-think our capacities and what can be done (in the face of a consensus that repeats the cynical overture that nothing much more can be done). For us, this has a genuinely resubjectivising potential, giving us more energy, more courage and more desire. We had more ideas for the provisional university in the few days after Radical Love than we had in the month before. All of this has something to tell us about the question of institutions and how they relate to transformative potentials. The construction of egalitarian and autonomous processes is perhaps the central political task today. The wholeness of the radical love experience exposes the emptiness of other political encounters such as protests, characterised by a reactive sensibility, a temporality (we protest when they do something) and spatiality (we protest outside their buildings, reinforcing their symbolic power) determined by power. Autonomous processes and institutions are possible because institutions,
while they tend to appear as the source of creativity, are in fact merely a kind of structuring (at best) or capturing (at worst) of it. Here we don’t want to get into an ultra-libertarian dismal of institutions. We prefer to see institutions as a generic organising apparatus characterised by closures and openings. The dilemma is, as Donal’s paper makes clear, how to maintain the openings and combat the closings. The potentials and limitations of the assemblage highlighted in Olkowski’s work on Deleuze and Guattarri are instructive here:

An assemblage is a multiplicity. If it is “territorialized” and “stratified” it is organized according to the principles of categorical reflection. Such an assemblage is slow and viscous—that is, stable—and makes possible ‘a kind of organism, in the sense of an organic whole, a signifying totality, or a determination attributable to a subject” (D and G quoted p 27)... Turned towards lines of flight that are movements of “deterritorialization”, that is, of destabilization, the assemblage is dismantled as an organism. This means that it is not an organic representation attributable to a subject; it is the monstrosity.’ (Olkowski: 27)

Radical Love teaches us how to dismantle an artistic/academic/political encounter as an ‘organism’ and institute the encounter as a resubjectivising ‘machine’.

Describing an excess of desire unfolding under trees is impossible without recalling the hedge schools of the eighteenth century. The hedge schools that proliferated across Ireland during the eighteenth century grew out of a refusal to accept state prescriptions on the content of knowledge and those who could speak in its name. For the English state the Irish people had no need of poetry or imagination. “In a country where there is hardly any employment but tilling the ground, it (learning) can eventually be of no use except to such as are bred to trades”. Education commissioners, geographers, economists, prospectors reported that the Irish were little more than hewers of wood and drawers of water. The 1806 report on the future of Irish education concluded: “to inculcate democracy and a foolish hankering after undefined liberty is not necessary in Ireland.” Instead children were taught Mrs. Marcet’s fairy tale: in an imaginary world of equality and freedom life is so diabolical and disturbing that the characters plead for a return to the status quo, to the security of their earlier enslavements.

As these lessons were being fostered by the state the Irish people were enacting a different truth, namely that equality did not equate to chaos and anarchy. Hedge school teachers had no qualification other than that offered to them through the support of the people. Classes had no curriculum other that which was desired by the students. Participation was not quantified according to pre-defined standards, each did according to what and how they could. The novelist William Carleton wrote of his experiences in the hedge school: “I did not read the classics as they are usually read by Learners. I read them as novels – I looked to the story – the narrative – not to the Grammatical or other difficulties.” This relates to Ranciere’s concept of ‘literarity’, the revelation that equality is inherent in the reader’s capacity to interpret texts for themselves even as the teacher is enrolled to interpret it for them. The hedge schools did not operate through any fixed curriculum. The most popular text book was the chapbook: cheap, widely distributed literature of romance, chivalry or highway robbery. They were banned by the state and considered to represent the depravity of the hedge schools where nothing but ‘gilded lies’ and ‘make believe’ were taught. Wakefield, in his ‘Account of Ireland’, feared for the security of the state because of the books being taught in the schools, books which were impossible to read “without imbuing a spirit of disloyalty to the government, and hatred of the present royal family and the English connection.”

Rather than submit to an education insistent on one, limited vision of Irish history, literature, geography and language, or submit to a life of animal-like subsistence, the elimination of thought and imagination, Irish people created an alternative model of education that refused either identification: the ‘good subject’ or the ‘ignorant peasant’. The importance of the hedge schools was not the content of the education, the books and the learning, but the fact of education itself, the alter-reality that stated: we are educating ourselves because we are able to. By refusing to succumb to a particular reality, they kept alive the possibility of imagining alternative futures. Politics holds to this form of conflict, the break
with a priori identifications, the claim to equality.

Before coming to Radical Love we had presumed that as an ‘art’ event our own project for an autonomous education in the university would be out of place. But just as cooking and eating were equal alongside performing and teaching so was our project equal simply by enacting the same concern for the commons, the same common concern. It is no exaggeration to say that we felt empowered to speak about it. While we had been involved in other contexts, with other audiences, we had never spoken so easily and openly. This wasn’t a matter of finding confidence as individual speakers but of finding confidence in how to cut lines of articulation through the always uncertain and fluid nature of an unrealised and unprecedented idea. Being empowered hastens the ability, and desire, to declare a position, an idea, without hesitation or insecurity. As Isabelle Stengers writes of the role of magic in the neo-pagan practice of witchcraft: “In short, it can be characterised in terms of efficacy: It compels everyone to produce, to ‘artifactualize’ themselves, in a mode that gives the issue around which they are all gathered the power to activate thinking, a thinking that belongs to no one, in which no one is right.”

The violent reduction of knowledge and learning within a state-project is today as visible as it was in the 18th century, although in very different ways. What we mean is the attempt by the state, capital and the university-bureaucracy to subordinate knowledge to the logic of the so-called ‘smart economy’. Knowledge as an independent and egalitarian activity gives way to knowledge as exchange value. Here the smart economy faces a variety of difficulties. In order for the smart economy to function the generation of knowledge, research and innovation within the university must be enabled. The difficulty is, the very activity of research requires an autonomy that is always in danger of escaping the control of capital (Hardt and Negri). The response has been, on the one hand, to rearticulate exploitation through the notion of ‘capture’. For example, in relation to Enterprise Ireland, Mary Hanifan, the Tainist and former Minster for Enterprise Trade and Employment, said: ‘Enterprise Ireland has developed a range of schemes to ensure we have the capacity to capture and transform...ideas...into commercial reality’, while Brian Cowen has talked of the progress made in ‘capturing, protecting and commercialising ideas and know-how’.

On the other hand, bureaucratic mechanisms which attempt to predetermine research and augment the domination of researchers are well in evidence. One of the main strategies here is to cut direct funding to the universities and instead have specific funding, for example linked to particular projects (with predetermined objectives) or research output. Our understanding is that Trinity, for example, currently plans to do away with all research staff directly funded by the university, i.e. to have only researchers with external funding. This would be a drastic attack on independent research.

Those of us whose lives are in one way or another entangled with the university find it increasingly difficult to remember that it is our curiosity and our desire that sustains the university, as the university-bureaucracy presents itself as the ‘owner’ of the university. From the perspective of the provisional university, the university is neither public (state-owned) nor private (capital-owned) but common. The challenge then is: how to ‘activate’ the common, the invisible force that sustains the university, but which the university-bureaucracy will not (and cannot) acknowledge? With this in mind, our goal is to express, augment and organise autonomous research and study, to withdraw our energy and curiosity in a kind of subjective strike and to rearticulate them in a collective, open and horizontal fashion. Ours is a university open to anyone who wishes to participate in the generation of knowledge, irrespective of the hierarchies and exclusions operated by the 2nd level education system and other inegalitarian forces. This is not an escape from the university-bureaucracy; it is an escape into the university, and into the conflicts and antagonisms at stake there. There is no transformation without conflict, and there is no escape without transformation. We don’t want to isolate ourselves but rather to stage a dispute with the university-bureaucracy. We imagine this in a number of senses. We intend to ‘liberate’ elements of the
university-apparatus and reorganise them, for example, through the collective re-conversion of institutional spaces into the ‘public spaces’ they are supposed to be. We also hope to imagine ways of interpolating the university-bureaucracy into a conflict around who has the authority to decide what happens to the university-to force the bureaucracy to show its hand. We believe that through the handling of a Wrong, equality can be demonstrated in a way which exposes the contingencies of the prevailing hierarchies and exclusions:

Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a world that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world; the world where they are and the world where they are not... (Ranciere, Disagreement: 26)

In other words, conflict is central. The question at this point might be, conflict with what? What’s crucial here is to not to conceptualise our antagonists as a ‘subject’:

That everyone can join in a political process means that the Two of political antagonism is not to be thought in terms of a purely destructive competition. A political process does not pit two well-defined antagonists against each other in a life-and-death struggle for supremacy. There is, strictly speaking, only one political actor, namely the we that comes out or demonstrates in the real of fraternity... What resists the organised political we is not an alternative political subject so much as the brute inertia of re-presentation, which is nothing other than the inertia of the status quo itself. Politics thus proceeds through the invention of new subtractive mechanisms of formalization that can confront and transform this formless resistance to change. (Hallward: 225)

Conflict is conflict against the limits of the situation, which are also limitations on equality. There are no shortage of names for the system of limitations (Empire, the state, the society of control), but there is most certainly a shortage of experimental conflict with it.

To return to both the experience and themes of Radical Love, autonomous education institutes a re-subjectivisation which activates an ‘equality of the commons’. But the question, as formulated in Donal’s contribution, is how to sustain this? We consider axiomatic equality to have a central importance in this because equality is the principal which makes us vigilant to any kind of closing down, stratification and emerging hierarchisation within an institution or process. Its continual demonstration maintains the subjective dimension without which institutions inevitably bureaucratise. The enactment of equality, to return to Ranciere’s terms, and the transgression of ‘policed’ boundaries inherent to such an enactment, already manifest a conflict with a given distribution of the sensible. What nourishes this, for us, is a an unbridled generosity and openness in relation to our confrontational process. We want to make our confrontation common, inviting people to join the conversation, generating more and more connections and alliances. This is I think what distinguishes an autonomous process from an isolationist process. Here we have to come out in the open, put our heads above the parapet, leave the social centre, ‘go public’. Only by such a multiplication can new encounters be produced and new possibilities irrupt, and thus sustain an ongoing political subjectivisation. Here I think we have to force the situation, and this means naming an element we particularly don’t like, in our case the university-bureaucracy. We think of this as a kind of interpolation, but in the opposite sense to that set out by Althuser. For Althuser ideological interpolation is the moment when the police man hails us (hey you!) and we answer. What we have in mind is a moment in which we (an unnamed subject which the bureaucracy is completely incapable of recognising) hail the bureaucracy, forcing them into a dispute, instituting a division, in short, making visible in a new way the ‘normal’ distribution of spaces and functions.

The question that was raised, and the question that must have occupied all our minds in the wake of
Radical Love, was how to give consistency to this feeling? For it was first and foremost a feeling, a feeling generated from so little, from such a short span of time and with no greater occurrence than the active taking part in a living commons. While struggles against the state go on it is clear that the political processes required to transform states of being are not as widely or as intensely experimented with. Politics is a refusal of the status quo. This refusal happens in the slightest moments and gestures of the everyday but it rarely coheres into a consistent claim to something else. Perhaps the value taken from Radical Love was the real, tangible sense that, starting on a necessarily small scale, the creation of a living commons, a community of equal participants, was really possible; not only possible but easy. Rather than submit or fight, which is a kind of submission, the possibility of creating a practical alternative becomes attainable and recognisable as immanent, as already existing through us. To be empowered is to realise that power is ours and that finally this power can be directed to different ends.

Patrick Bresnihan & Mick Byrne

References


