

Putzstrategien

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Alejandro Strus and Sonja Hornung are Masters students at the Weissensee School of Art in Berlin. This past year we were among the students pushing for changes in the fee structure of Raumstrategien (Spatial Strategies). This account details our personal perspectives on the events that unfolded.



The bulletin board in the Berlin-Weissensee School of Art is painted black and decorated by an anonymous student.

In autumn 2014, concerns were growing again at the Berlin-Weissensee School of Art over the tuition fees charged to students in one of the six MA programs offered at the university. The semester fee of €1250 has been, since the program's inception, the source of problems for students of Raumstrategien, a small trans-disciplinary program focused on art in public space, political theory and political (artistic) practice.

The fact that we need to pay for our education may come as a surprise; tuition fees are actually quite rare in Germany, with Lower Saxony announcing last autumn as the last German state to abolish fees for public universities. In the context of Berlin, where rents and living expenses are on the rise, earning the money to cover

fees has become increasingly difficult. Some of the Raumstrategien students have scholarships or grants from the German state system – grants that are not enough for covering fees, but only living costs. Most of us, however, cover our fees through either part-time work or debt or a combination of both. As a result, it becomes difficult to strike a reasonable balance between work and study. Many of us have found ourselves negotiating with the art school administration to take breaks from our studies. It is clear to us that a tuition-free Masters, or indeed even a Masters with reduced tuition costs, would alleviate a great deal of this pressure, to the long-term benefit of the course.

Therefore, it is not just idealism, but also through personal experience that we have learned the importance of free education also laid out by the Berlin constitution, Article 21: that “Art and knowledge, research and teaching are free.”

Likewise, it is not only idealism, but also a lived sense of this pressure that led us in autumn 2014 to begin investigating our circumstances more thoroughly. Since Raumstrategien is a relatively new program born out of the educational reforms of the 1990s, we learned that our predicament is a part of a broader shift in the higher education landscape towards modularized learning focused on producing flexible entrepreneurial thinkers for a rapidly changing, knowledge-based job market.

We embarked on a process of research, touching on the complex histories of educational reform and university protest in Europe. One particular strand we found in this history begins with Reinhard Mohn’s decision to go into business, rather than to study.

Reinhard Mohn

In 1947, upon returning to his hometown in Gütersloh, Germany, 25-year-old Reinhard Mohn decided not to go to university as he had once dreamt. Instead, he applied himself to rescuing his father’s business, Bertelsmann, from the rubble of World War II. This was no easy task in British-occupied Gütersloh, since Mohn senior had been an enthusiastic member of the SS and the company was one of the key publishers of Nazi propaganda.

However, over the following decades Bertelsmann rose to become the sixth-largest media corporation globally, with one hundred twelve thousand thirty-seven Bertelsmann employees worldwide and an empire rivaling that of Axel Springer or Rupert Murdoch. As early as 1977, Mohn established the Bertelsmann Foundation, a non-profit political think-tank which currently owns 77.4% of Bertelsmann. Not only was the foundation a convenient way to reduce Bertelsmann’s taxation obligations, but it also allowed Mohn to turn his influence to politics: “I had the impression that our political system back then was in a very bad shape – I still have the impression that it’s in a very bad shape – and so through the Bertelsmann

Foundation I looked for new ways for politics ... My offer for politics is to sell the people competition. Competition makes people strive harder, I have noticed, and this should be brought to politicians' attention." Through intensive and well-funded research papers, Bertelsmann-funded summits held with the political elite, and lobby work, the Bertelsmann Foundation has pushed forward principles of entrepreneurialism and meritocracy in other areas of society on a European and global level. Bertelsmann's agenda has found its way into various austerity processes, from Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010 to the Bologna Process.

Bertelsmann + Life-long learning = Bologna

One area of research that preoccupied the Bertelsmann's think-tank from the outset was higher education. In 1994, the Centre for Higher Education (CHE) was established by the Bertelsmann Foundation in Gütersloh with the intention of forging a path for tertiary education reform. CHE-funded research and lobbying was to form a basis for the Bologna Declaration (1999) and subsequent systematization of the European tertiary education into a competitive, modularized bachelor/masters



Putzstrategien poster.

model that is held accountable to privatized and expensive accreditation processes. Even earlier, the Bertelsmann Foundation, together with the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT) published a short but significant paper in 1995 entitled “Education for Europeans – Towards the Learning Society.” The paper argues that, in the shift towards the knowledge economy and a highly competitive, open and liberal market, the global viability of Europe hinges on “humane resources.” In order to remain competitive, Europe’s “humane resources” must be able to adapt quickly in a rapidly changing, information-driven economy. This is where the principle of Lifelong Learning—“‘cradle to grave’ continuous learning”—comes into play.

For the life-long learner, “adolescence” is characterized by “the obligation to learn” and motivated by externally-imposed “attainment goals and final qualifications.” “Young adults” then “enter the world of work or start their vocational training, which ends when they take up regular employment.” At this stage they learn “informal learning, self-directed learning, social, cultural, and personal skills ... [and] networking.” Systematic learning is supplied by efficient, “modularized” educational content. This allows one, during “adult life”, to “gradually build up competency profiles” both informally and through formal continued vocational training, because due to a “strong involvement in professional life and family life, time is very scarce for adults.” And the elderly? Here, “learners have greater freedom to decide for themselves whether, how and for what purpose they should take part in learning activities.” The elderly alone are promised “independence and autonomy.”

This is a profoundly political agenda. In the life-long learner can be found the new, flexible, neoliberal subject forged through an educational system that has been streamlined to suit the agenda of industrial lobbyists, among which Bertelsmann is a key player (the company even has a policy for the “lifelong learning” of its own employees). Propelled by lobbying done by the Bertelsmann Foundation and its affiliate, the CHE, not to mention by Bertelsmann’s clout in the industry-driven ERT, Lifelong Learning has since become one of the main tenets of European education policy, driven largely by the Bologna process. The result is an education system that is increasingly market-oriented.

Germany

In the German context, the “Bolognisation” of the tertiary education system has seen the implementation of Bologna’s hallmark, a strict, two-tiered bachelor/master structure, in which learning is modularized into quantifiable units of credit points. This system replaced the former and more relaxed Diplom/Meister system more focused on self-directed, research-based outcomes in the Humboldtian tradition of autonomous learning, academic freedom and the unity of teaching and research. Locally, the implementation of Bologna in Berlin conveniently coincided with a more general “rationalization” of higher education. For example, universities are



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now funded according to three quota categories: the number of students enrolled, the number of students studying full-time, and the number of students who graduate. The Berlin Senate sets individualized quotas for each university, with preset funding increases if student quotas are met. Previously students could remain in university as long as was needed, but now, students are generally expected to take no longer than 5 years to complete their studies. In the context of post-crisis Europe, student intakes are on the rise, even as teaching resources are whittled down into shorter-term contracts as a result of stringent funding. Faculty departments increasingly look to private-public partnerships in order to fill the funding gap.

Weiterbildung

This shift has also seen the introduction of a new category in German higher education: the *Weiterbildungsstudiengang* or postgraduate training course, which aligns exactly with the market-oriented principles of life-long learning. These courses last between one and two years and (in theory) are supposed to be entirely self-funded, making functional the educational system under the pressure of the job

market's demand for graduates. Although technically in Germany education is free across the board, fees of up to €30,000 can apply to such courses. There is no legal limit to the amount charged, which is decided by the university. Weiterbildung courses are often designed in close cooperation with companies or research foundations with the aim of providing clear career outcomes for their students (for example, the Berlin Technical University's M.Sc. in Energy-Efficient Transport Systems, which is co-funded by Volkswagen and Gasag, or the M.Sc. in Urban Development, which exists through a public-private partnership with corporate partners in El Gouna, Egypt). Weiterbildung courses in the humanities or fine arts are less common, for the obvious reason that such areas of knowledge are less commercially viable – although there are some exceptions, our own MA being one of them.

In Berlin, the number of Weiterbildungsstudiengänge are on the rise, with over 65 paid courses sprouting over the last two decades. Many of them are taught in English and appear to cater to well-moneyed international students. All universities are contractually obliged to the Berlin Senate to offer professional training courses.

From Raumstrategien to Putzstrategien

Following the reunification of Berlin in 1990, Weissensee, as the former East Berlin academy of art, experienced a period of uncertainty. Its architecture program was shut down and, after a series of attempts to create a replacement program, Raumstrategien was founded as a trans-disciplinary Weiterbildung program. Alongside the school's MA in Art Therapy, Raumstrategien fulfills Weissensee's contractual obligation to offer postgraduate vocational training. However, unlike in more traditional Master courses, Raumstrategien students come from a variety of fields such as architecture, design, fine art, cultural studies and curatorial studies.

In short, Raumstrategien is something of a black sheep: it is younger than the other departments, doesn't conform to their 5-year course-structure, and its content is interdisciplinary. Structurally, Raumstrategien occupies a strange position. While on paper it is required to be a self-funded professional training program for mature students who are already in the workforce, the reality is quite different. As a new department in the university, Raumstrategien is a theory-based program with a critical focus that is not out of step with other "art as research" approaches found in British, American, or other German institutions. Without having recourse to the exact figures, we find it difficult to imagine how the MA course could ever commercially carry its own costs, as is legally stipulated.

The term "neoliberal ideology" creates a diffuse and elusive opponent. However, institutions are built, and changed, by people negotiating with one another, face-to-face. No matter how strong an emphasis Raumstrategien's course content places on institutional critique and researching new ways of making art practices public, the MA is currently a program that structurally must fit a fee-based and market-based

structure for university education. Inspired by our studies, we began to consider ways we could change the institution of Weissensee, to better integrate Raumstrategien into the university community as a whole. Why shouldn't Raumstrategien students be able to change our fee structure based on principles of self-representation and negotiation?

There had been intermittent discussions about reducing the fees almost since Raumstrategien first opened, and in the fall of 2014 some students began meeting in school and after-hours to revive the issue again in the face of dwindling student numbers, and in full appreciation of what our study program could become if it were free, like other courses in Germany.

As a first step, students met with the Vice Chancellor of the school and outlined various scenarios for reclassifying the program, or reducing fees to the lowest amount legally permitted. In response, the only viable option suggested to us was to chase after third-party private sponsorship to cover the costs of the course, an option we discussed in detail, with the conclusion that private funding would negatively affect the independence of the MA as a "free space" for autonomous artistic practice and critique. In this meeting, it was hinted that the MA might be closed if it did not carry its own costs. This form of precarity was all-too-familiar on a personal level: for international students, simply not paying the fees would entail ex-matriculation and losing their visas. So a protest in the form of a fee boycott was not an option.



Students handing out flyers around the art school.

Around the same time, a loose organisational group formed called the AkSa—Arbeitskreis Studiengebühren abschaffen [Working group to abolish student fees]. The group made contact with the student union, and we decided on a democratic, consensus-based decision-making process that would be transparently communicated to students not directly involved in the group. It was decided that there would be a formal legal approach petitioning the university's academic senate (and eventually, if necessary, the Berliner Senate) to address the tuition fees issue, alongside a strategy of awareness-raising through the publication of a manifesto and a series of protest actions.

After our initial meeting with the vice-chancellor, negotiations continued with the school administration, who met with our professors in two closed meetings. In these meetings the option of part-time study was discussed. While an improvement (an option which had previously been refused to Raumstrategien students), this measure would not reduce our fees, but simply spread the amount over a longer time period.

In frustration over our exclusion from these meetings, some students worked to spread awareness of the situation throughout the school community. The "Putzstrategien"—Cleaning Strategies/Trouble Strategies—protests saw small numbers of us dressing up in mismatched cleaning uniforms. We cleaned the school's foyer and eating area while handing fliers to classmates and staff. This was accompanied by a poster campaign which plastered copies of our tuition bills throughout the university. The Raumstrategien bulletin board in the central administrative building was also blackened-out and replaced by a single notice: "fee", with tear-off tabs labeled with the number: €1250. The cleaning action referenced the Hi-Red Center performance group, who cleaned Tokyo Subways before the 1964 Olympic Games. Significantly, it also referred to our own jobs we work to pay our fees, and the way it separates us from our peers in other departments of the school.

The decisions to escalate from meeting with the Vice Chancellor to publishing our manifesto and running a small-scale protest in the art school were not without internal controversy, and a number of Raumstrategien students expressed doubts as to how effective our protest might be, voicing reasonable frustration over undemocratic decision-making processes. Time pressures made it difficult to meet as a complete group. Being students, workers and also protesters simultaneously, by the end of the semester we were reaching our limit.

At the same time, we were warmed by the level of help and support from the student union, who provided us with invaluable support from the very beginning in all of this. We also found support among other, non-fee paying students – many of whom were horrified to find out how much we paid – and some university staff, in particular, the janitors, gatehouse workers, the workers in the school cafeteria, were overwhelmingly supportive.



Students cleaning the cafeteria.

However, the reaction from the administration of the art school to our protest was more extreme than we had envisaged. What was intended as a slow, carefully researched investigation into the political and legal background of our situation – a means to open a conversation with the art school about a taboo topic – escalated very quickly (we were all surprised at how quickly) into a conflict-laden relationship with the art school administration, despite the fact that, aside from one meeting, there was no direct communication between the administration and the students as a group. Pressure was directed, instead, towards our professors, who had stood by – but were by no means responsible for – our actions. It was at this point that we decided to stop our protest, at least temporarily. Very recent developments at Berlin's Universität der Künste, where an affiliated group of students (Loose Grip) performed a boycott, have sparked shared discussions over the economization of learning in Berlin.

Conclusions

The discussion over Raumstrategien, and the Weiterbildungsstudiengang programs in general, comes at a time where austere education funding policies coincide with negotiations over the societal function of universities. The question of whether higher-education should provide a space for research and artwork, or to a job-training role is a particularly acute one for art schools. Here, attempts to restructure ter-

tiary education institutions to suit industry-designed standards fail on several levels. Practically, the Bologna credit system is applied, and then circumvented when it becomes untenable to fit certain subjects – for example, an art project that, organically, stretches over two-and-a half semesters – into a scheduled system of modularized learning. While it is helpful to enhance international mobility for students, this goal, the main “selling-point” of the Bologna reforms, hardly seems to justify the wholesale destruction of older learning structures that were more focused on self-directed learning and solid student-professor relationships. On a moral level, the proliferation of supposedly self-funding study programs such as the *Weiterbildungsstudiengang* are also problematic, as they circumvent the established democratic support for free education, and tap into a familiar North American phenomenon: the use of “wealthy” foreign students as a revenue stream on the backs (and reputations) of public institutions. If the first criteria for acceptance into a course of study is income, the integrity of the entire education system as a whole is affected.

Our protest, by no means perfectly executed, also had far from perfect results. Although the option of part-time study will now be available in the coming semester – a definite improvement and a direct result of the protest – we still, ultimately, pay the same amount of money for our studies. On the one hand, our course is still mis-categorized as a “professionalization” degree that will –realistically – neither carry its own costs nor produce bright-eyed young professionals eager to fill the next gap in the job market. On the other hand, the ideal of free education for *Raumstrategien* students still remains totally out of the question. Our relationship with the administration of the art school, already burdened by the usual problems that come hand-in-hand with a course consisting of 50% international students (visa issues, language problems, financial problems, late fee payments due to mismatching funding cycles, etc.) has not improved since the protests, the result of honest misunderstanding, as well as very genuine financial pressures within the art school itself.

Why was our protest so quickly shut down? We learned that we are caught in a kind of pincer movement born out of a broader context. From below, the realities of “life-long learning” are setting in across Europe, as rising job precarity and living costs as a result of austerity measures and the shift to a knowledge-based economy have led to a particularly unstable existence for creative workers, leading to a job landscape where re-skilling is essential for survival. This is a pressure we experience on a personal and a generational level. On a structural level, our art school is effected by the rationalization of higher education from free, self-directed learning based on the principle of autonomous thought, to a modularized, fractured professionalization system coinciding with an efficiency-oriented approach to funding based on quantities of students, rather than quality of teaching and learning. Importantly, both the students of *Raumstrategien*, the course itself, and the leadership of *Weisensee* actively resist these pressures (in 2013, the school even negotiated to retain the old *Diplom/Meisterschule* system for the painting and sculpture departments,

in defiance of the Bologna reform model). But – we take it on trust – where money is short, there are no easy solutions.

Nonetheless, Raumstrategien enjoyed a certain level of visibility throughout this period. Additionally, we developed a sensibility for the shifting social roles of universities in Germany, the pressures of the market, and our positioning in this rubric. This knowledge is now a part of our program, and we continue to work with it. The research, and even the conflict-laden process behind the protests, brought us together as a group, and laid the groundwork for an exhibition entitled “Pay-Off” that took place this summer in Weissensee’s end-of-year show. Most importantly, together, we now have a very clear understanding of what exactly we are resisting.

Endnotes

1 Bertelsmann in an interview, translated by the authors.

2 See <http://www.bertelsmannkritik.de> (only available in German)

3 See “Strategy for Lifelong Learning in the Federal Republic of Germany,” available online: <http://www.blk-bonn.de/papers/volume115-english.pdf>