

What is a System?

These workshops aim to personalize and internalize the studio process and architecture theory, to detach them from their institutional origins and transfer them to a private and personal location within each participant. This transfer is the reason for the word "idiot" in the titles — "The Idiot's Guide to Studio," "The Idiot's Guide to Architecture Theory." An idiot is a private person, and here we use it to designate *what is private in a person*, i.e. what cannot be taken back or altered without permission. At the same time the private person keeps this possession his/her own only by "giving it up" and "giving it out," risking it, exposing it, opening it to being destroyed, damaged, and disavowed.

This paradox points to the kind of permanence that does not need to be protected or defended. It is self-preserving. The self-giving and self-maintaining possession — possessed only by being given away, so to speak — points to the other aim of the workshops: *personal resilience*.

We can define resilience by pointing to the false models that have been used to promote it. The first of these is the idea of mastery that, attained prematurely, cannot be defended against the most feeble attacks yet which causes the defendant to grasp it even more tightly. It's a losing game. Most educational models are built around the idea of mastery — what other model could there be? most would ask. Mastery is always defined by someone other than the person who is compelled or required to attain it. Parents demand mastery of politeness and correct behavior; teachers require us to spell correctly and know our multiplication tables; universities require us to pass exams and maintain high grade point averages. Even the most naïve among us however realizes the ulterior motives in all these demands. The point seems to be not to master what we have pretended to master but, rather, to have demonstrated the fact of mastery itself, to be ranked and compared to other masters, to subject ourselves to the game of comparative mastery in which everyone is a winner to those below and a loser to those above.

The questions must be asked: who maintains these systems, and what do they get out of our willing submission to these comparative orders? The answer is "anyone who wishes to secure control over those who buy into the idea of mastery." In other words, mastery itself is a two-edged blade that lures us with the promise of knowing something but really aims to sort us out for rewards and punishments based on a system to which we have little or no access.

Education, real education, begins with a repudiation of this system of the Other, which orders us according to its demands and pleasures. Education begins with the "idiocy" that seeks to maintain a possession using a somewhat irrational logic of keeping by giving away. Real education begins with privacy. And, privacy depends on resilience.

To take the idea of resilience one step further engages the need for self-discipline. Once the individual takes responsibility for maintaining a private/idiotic space for developing ideas and sensibilities — a space that must be continually exposed to loss and revision! — the necessity for a method comes into play. First, method is required to maintain the distance from mastery and the seduction of the system of the Other. In the terms of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, this method is called "askesis," the bases of the word "ascetic." Once the individual takes steps to step aside from the general synchronized flow of demands and required responses in the Other's structure of desire/mastery, *clinamen* creates an exception, an openness (*kenosis*) within this flow that is both a space apart (studio is an example) and a time, the ability to insert a swerve/*clinamen* at any place within the general flow.

Bloom's six terms, which are the vocabulary of the workshops, are not simply qualities or actions in a list. These would be quickly confused, forgotten, misinterpreted. It is necessary to see all six terms as a system, a "team" of ideas that reinforce each other and reflect the whole idea in each part, whose specialized qualities amount to different points of view taken from inside the system. System is not dogma. There is no single vision of it. The system used to resist the imposed demands of mastery (i.e. normative, "ideological" education), must answer only to the mastery of the self embodied by self-discipline needed to establish resistance and resilience. The meanings of askesis, kenosis, *clinamen*, *tessera*, *apophrades*, and *dæmon* (the

six terms of the special critical language we use to establish a set of points of view) have a history and are not arbitrary. Each comes together in Bloom's system from a variety of unconnected origins. Yet, each term already echoes the others. The discovery of any one of them would lead to the discovery of *all the others*, as well as the discovery of their *geometric relationship*. Left to each idiot's own devices, the idiot-users of the Bloom system would produce an idiotic/idiosyncratic version that would comply with the general idea of the system. The only indication of error would be a failure, in any version, of one term to uncover and disclose some secret relationship of all the others.

The system does not exclude other terms or interests. It does not pretend to subsume all other terms and systems; it is a system of self-discipline and discovery, resistance to the demands of mastery imposed by the Other. System is, quite simply, the discovery that the *means* of looking for answers contain, in some mysterious sense, the answers themselves. The paradox is that this is not a justification for sealing one's self off from external influence, but the commandment to expose one's projects to any and all threats, sources, incursions, corruptions, openings, and promises — again, the inverted logic of possessing by giving away.

Freedom is the real ultimate aim of this "idiotic" approach to education — not the freedom to be randomly idiotic in the usual sense, but the embrace of the uncertainty of choice itself, the responsibility to understand how choice is in a fundamental sense a "forced choice" that must be overcome by stepping outside of, away from, the ideology of its structure. Freedom is discovered by giving up the idea of freedom, of renouncing the idea of originality, of exposing mastery as the game of Masters, not servants (Hegel).

In this last sense, freedom in architectural inquiry is like the freedom of the poet, artist, musician, film-maker, or any other "creative" worker who must first denounce the idea of creativity and begin to undertake a mental archaeology, where ancient sites are understood by sifting through dust that has been marked out by a rigorous objective grid. That grid is system.

Notes on Bloom's *Anxiety as a System*. Do Bloom's six Greek terms constitute an actual system, or are they simply "assembled" for the convenience of playing out his narrative about how weak poets struggle to overcome their predecessors to become strong poets? Bloom makes no such claim, but the book features these terms as necessary components of the process by which the weak poet must "misread" his predecessors. Two commentators have claimed that Bloom's terms constitute a system. Songsuk Susan Hahn, in *Contradiction in Motion: Hegel's Organic Concept of Life and Value* (Cornell, 2007) and Paul Endo's article on *Askesis* in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*, ed. Irene Rima Makaryk (University of Toronto, 1993) connect the system to the motions of Hegelian dialectic. The young poet is at first contained by the dominant influence of the older; at the end of the process of misreading, it seems that, anachronistically, the older poet has somehow/impossibly been influenced by the younger. This is the paradox of haunting: that the ghost somehow implicitly contained what he was to haunt after death, but that this kernel was not discovered until the later moment. The telling insight is the use of the (Lacanian) idea of extimacy (*extimité*), applied to the fantasy of travel through time. The flip from being contained by the past to appearing in the past as a secret player can be put into an entertaining fictional narrative. This kind of inversion is a central quality of Hegelian dialectic, as when the servant is shown to be the master of the master in Hegel's famous Master-Servant example. The flip escapes the "forced choice" of logic seen as dialectic. It pulls back the curtain on the system that forever contradicts itself — compare this to the "mastery system" of contemporary education — in order to establish ideological dominance, i.e. to be forever outside the scene, pulling the strings of puppets forced to obey the rules that the master does not obey.