

### I could teach:

1. The basics of skateboarding.
2. The basics of acting.
3. Making sushi.
4. The basics of waitering.
5. The basic of AFL.

### I would like to learn:

1. To sing a song well.
2. How to do a cross word.
3. How to ollie.
4. ~~How to make a~~ How to play guitar.
5. ~~How to tell a good joke.~~  
How to meditate.

## Give and take: Teaching and Learning in Art and Life

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*There is only one subject matter for education and that is Life in all its manifestations*

- Alfred North Whitehead, in *The Aims of Education*

As universities tighten their belts with funding cuts and higher costs, many varying solutions are being sought to combat reduced access to education for those who can't afford it. Advocates of a more accessible higher education strategy fight political and practical battles toward institutional reform over years, with little hope of radical change. Looking away from traditional institutional learning inscribed with political and cultural agendas and histories, structural questions around teaching and learning are being asked.

As well as considering issues of socioeconomic access to education, there is a proliferation of projects (with numerous social and political agendas) that dismantle and refigure the institutionalised pedagogy of traditional education systems. 'Free schools' and 'free universities' operate internationally and can be traced back to radical Egyptian models of education in the 1900s<sup>1</sup>. New York's Trade School utilises an open barter system of skill and knowledge exchange<sup>2</sup> and time banking projects eschew

monetary exchange for a time-based currency. Sometimes artists initiate these projects, other times they are lead by activists or community-minded individuals.

Trade School was started by a small collective of self-defined 'creatives' for a 'creative community'. Described as celebrating 'practical wisdom, mutual respect, and the social nature of exchange', workshops could be offered by anyone, and included how to start your own coffee shop, lighting for photography and crocheting for left handed people. In return, the teacher could specify whatever they wanted. People asked for website assistance, woolen socks and mix-tapes amongst other more whimsical requests like a story of generosity to a stranger. Labour was always an option in the exchange, so (in theory) everyone could 'afford' to barter.

The organising committee bartered skills for short-term leases in vacant properties from which the project operated – usually for three months at a time. Although Trade School assumed artists as participants in the project, it is not posited as an artistic project and existed outside art institutions, like many free schools and free universities.

Above: Dara Gill, *Natalie Teach and Learn List* (2011), performance documentation



### I could teach:

1. Unicycling
2. Hockey
3. Rockclimbing
4. Basic first aid
5. Adagio (floor work stuff)

### I would like to learn:

1. Skateboard
2. Photo shop
3. Cook something new
4. Home brewing
5. Basic woodwork

*Time/bank*, a project by Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidokle, is essentially an online time-banking system as art. In theory, this project is indecipherable from its 'non-art' counterparts. For Aranda and Vidokle *Time/bank* exchanges "create a sense of worth for many of the exchanges that already take place within our field – particularly those that do not produce commodities and often escape the structures that validate only certain forms of exchange as significant or profitable".<sup>3</sup> It could be argued that it is purely the discourse around each project – or the social, professional and community networks they access – that places a project within or outside the parameters of 'art'. Increasingly in this socially engaged, participatory and relational context the dichotomy between art and 'real life' has become untenable.

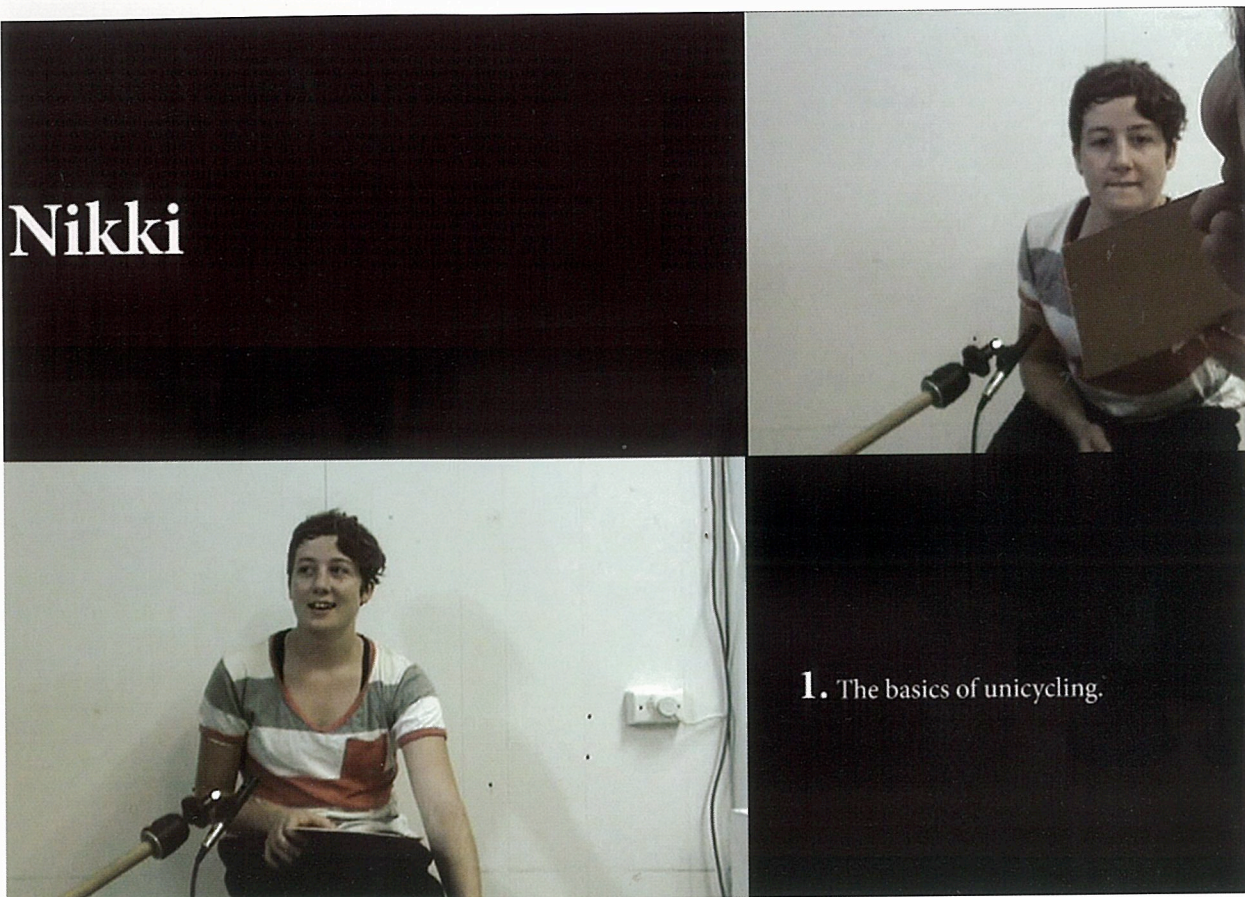
A number of local artists have developed their own projects that implement processes of teaching, learning and community. Lara Thoms' *The Experts Project* and Dara Gill's *Knowledge Barter Experiment* both take from a legacy of alternative economic and pedagogic models, however operate within their distinct micro-economy. In the cases of these projects the value of time, knowledge, skills and objects is pre-determined by, or negotiated within, an artistic framework.

Both Gill and Thoms engage participants to identify areas of their own expertise, and posit participants as teachers in their projects. This is in keeping with the democratic sensibility of many barter-based exchanges, where teacher becomes student and vice versa. In Gill's case, this process is captured on film and forms part of the documentation of the project. Gill interviews each participant, asking them to write on a piece of paper five things they could teach and five things they could like to learn. A conversation between the artist and the participant is recorded, edited and posted online. These interviews map assured initial responses, reflective intervals and often an explanation of suggested teaching areas (it is unclear whether the rationalisation is being made to Gill, as interviewer, an invisible audience on the other side of camera lens, or reflectively to the participant themselves).

The participant's internal process of identifying the strengths and gaps within their knowledge at the crux of the conceptual relevance of Gill's project. Gill relates each participant's self-doubt to a Satrean conception of anxiety, which forces a 'reflective apprehension of the self'.<sup>4</sup> The self-doubt that exists in most participants as they are asked what they can teach is transformative in the uplifting realisation (and underpinning



# Nikki



## 1. The basics of unicycling.

assumption of many of these works) that everyone has something to impart. Of all of Gill's works that engage with the experience and significance of anxiety in everyday life, on the surface this is alongside the most optimistic. However, the introspective experience of the participant complicates the simple premise of the form. Miwon Kwon asserts such processes of artistic exchange 'test each person's sense of honor and dishonor, shame, power, risk, fear, status, humiliation and prestige'<sup>5</sup>. A strange counterpoint to the feel-good 'you can do it!' sense of empowerment that comes with the free sharing of skills and knowledge, the project also acts as a portrait of the process of reflective apprehension it sparks.

Gill has experimented with this portraiture in a number of other works which explore the terrain of anxiety. *Horror Vaccui* (2009) is a series of six videos that document an individual waiting for an interview to occur. Gill sets up a camera and leaves the room telling each subject he is retrieving something from outside. He closes the door behind him and silently locks it. The video documents each subject for around 20 minutes. They wait, amuse themselves with lighters, or mobile phones before they become suspicious and attempt to leave the room. In another work,

*Untitled (Rubber Band Portraits)* (2010), he documents three individuals' reactions to having a rubber band poised to flick their face. Each reflection occurs in varying temporalities and contexts, but all illustrate Gill's fascination with the intricacies of corporeal indications of psychological processes of self-analysis, internal reasoning, self-doubt and eventual resolve.

For *The Experts Project*, Lara Thoms situated herself in public space – usually within a library – with a sign which read 'Expertise Desired'. Seeking expertise in Minto, Castlemaine, Northcote and Redfern, she had conversations with interested passersby who joined her, sometimes for a few minutes and sometimes for a few hours. Thoms recorded her interactions by taking notes, without a video or audio documentation of any part of the conversation.

The artistic outcome of Thoms' lessons is threefold. If things 'are going well' with an expert, she will ask them if they would like to take a photograph of her dressed as them. She is planning on making a publication, and has presented a three-hour performance lecture where the photographs were projected on the wall of a small room with the audience seated around a repurposed lazy-Susan-cum-chocolate wheel. Thoms and

Above: Dara Gill, *Nikki Interview Stills* (2011), video documentation of action  
Facing page: Lara Thoms, *Actor of Pedophile* (2011), performance documentation. Photo: John Flouse





audience members spun the wheel to hear one of fifty lessons, a introduction to the project, the artist's doubts, or to take a drinks break. Each number on the wheel corresponded with a card, filed away in a box next to one of the audience's seats. As a number came up, Thoms retrieved a card and read out a succinct list, the key points of the corresponding lesson. This formality was soon replaced with funny (and sometimes disturbing) anecdotes of her encounters, and members of the audience joined in the conversation, asking questions and sharing their perspectives.

Contrary to Gill's external role, never actually participating in an exchange himself, Thoms describes *The Experts Project* as being sparked by her own insecurity about 'being an expert in nothing'. As she recounts with a grin the afternoon spent with Shirl – expert in decorating toilet roll holders – it seems clear that whatever expertise she has gained, social connections transcend the hundreds of lessons she received. It is equally the knowledge shared and the social encounter of the project that is the object of value in each exchange.

The actual knowledge that is exchanged between participants in both *Knowledge Barter Experiment* and *The Experts Project* is so simple it is almost boring. As Thoms recounts her lesson in turning your living room into a Japanese restaurant, I am reminded that both teaching and learning are part of the everyday. Knowledge and skills are traded on an everyday basis, in the workplace, amongst friends and family and increasingly online. It can be easy to forget that we all systematically take on the roles of students, teachers, experts and amateurs; and that the economy of knowledge is one that is ingrained in our very existence.

1. Anthony Gorman, 'Anarchists in Education: The Free Popular University in Egypt (1901)' *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol 41, No. 3. (May 2005): 303-320.
2. See [www.ourgoods.org](http://www.ourgoods.org) for an archive of past Trade School classes.
3. Julieta Aranda and Anton Vidokle, *About I Time/Bank* by e-flux <http://www.e-flux.com/timebank/about> Accessed May 3 2011.
4. Jean-Pau Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (New York: Routledge, 2003); referenced in Gill, *Dara Not-Yet* BFA Hons. Thesis [Unpublished] 2009.
5. Miwon Kwon, 'Exchange Rate' in Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).