


Please cite the Published Version

Trafi-Prats, Laura  (2021) Book review : Thinking and Conversing With Illich and Baldacchino. *Studies in Art Education*, 62 (4). pp. 424-428. ISSN 0039-3541

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393541.2021.1975950>

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

Version: Accepted Version

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Additional Information: This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Studies in Art Education* on 5th January 2022, available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/00393541.2021.1975950>.

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Baldacchino, J. (2020). *Educing Ivan Illich: Reform, contingency and disestablishment*. New York: Peter Lang. 184 pp. ISBN 978-1-4331-7643-2.

Reviewed by Laura Trafi-Prats

Manchester Metropolitan University

l.trafi-prats@mmu.ac.uk ORCID: [0000-0002-3468-1073](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3468-1073)

Thinking and Conversing with Illich and Baldacchino

Baldacchino (2020) begins *Educing Ivan Illich* by affirming that the book is not a primer. I recognize that reading such a statement was a bit disconcerting. How was I going to read and review such a book without being very familiar with Illich's work? Some art educators may ask themselves the same question. However, I should say that I found the experience of reading *Educing Ivan Illich* very significant. Not only did it widen my understanding of Illich's ideas, but also, I found Baldacchino's conversation with such ideas helpful in defining philosophical, ethical, and creative frameworks for how to relate to contemporary educational institutions and how to make connections to economic and political powers. Ivan Illich (Vienna 1926—Dresden 2002) was an intellectual formed in the hybridity of the Catholic and Judaic traditions from Southern Europe. His family was originally from the Dalmatian region in Croatia. He studied theological philosophy and priesthood. Through his career, he developed scholarship and political practice in the fields of social theory, healthcare, and education, and he worked in Europe and the Americas (New York, Puerto Rico, Mexico). He is recognized in the fields of critical pedagogy and education studies for his book *Deschooling Society* (Illich, 1971/2012), which critiques today's economized approach to knowledge production. The book articulates deschooling as the autonomous, creative and artful practices of education and learning that politically, epistemologically, and existentially differentiate from practices of being schooled.

Baldacchino characterizes *Educating Ivan Illich* as a creative exercise of reading with, making sense of, and conversing with Illich. He approaches Illich widely, without avoiding his complex relationships with Catholic institutions and intellectual traditions, clearly extending the scope beyond the books often cited in education theory. The book is organized with a focus on eight fascinating concepts, each developed in corresponding chapters: Immanence, utopia, tradition, learning, reform, contingency, and disestablishment. It extends an invitation to read about Illich's ideas within a wide context of philosophers who influenced his intellectual development, and philosophers that resonate with Baldacchino's own interests, in an essayistic gesture that seeks to open up Illich's work and help readers to critically understand its currency for education, social analysis, and knowledge production today.

Baldacchino is invested in not tying Illich to widely accepted ideological classifications, such as being a progressive philosopher connected to the left, assuming that he is part of the critical pedagogy canon, or that he contributed to Liberation Theology, just to offer some examples engaged in the book. The project of de-ideologizing Illich brings into relevance Illich's commitment to the immanence of thought as grounded in his own biographical attachment to the history of the Mediterranean with its blending of Judaic and Christian traditions. As Baldacchino notes, this blending makes both thought and self deeply hybrid. Thus, central to Illich and Baldacchino's projects is challenging a unified sense of identity through thinkers in the Christian tradition, such as Nicolas Cusano, John of the Cross, and others, but also via contemporary political thinkers such as Arendt or Rose, whose texts articulate a radical humanism grounded in practices of self-questioning and self-doubt. This radical humanism is a resistance to relating to the world with fixed and simplified images, as identarian thought conveys. It considers that the hidden, silent, and quiet are important

ways of forming other styles of community that differ from the more visible and formalized social appearances sanctioned by the church, the school, or other modern institutions. Consistent with this sense of immanence and cultural hybridity, deschooling invokes an “engagement with education that is found” (Baldacchino, 2020, p. 31), not with education as institution or schooling. For Illich, education that is found happens at the periphery of the humanistic narrative and demands of particular approaches that attend to the hidden and the silent. One example of this is given in *The Vineyard of the Text*, where Illich (1993) invokes “the houses of reading, not unlike of the Jewish *shul*, Islamic *medersa* and the monastery” (p. 3) as examples of building life in common (what Illich and Baldacchino call conviviality) in silence and as a cultivation of the intellect. In this life, one creates self-journeys through reading as a way of building a sense of awareness towards what is immanently present and through a deep engagement and conversation with tradition. The sections that I enjoyed most reading in the book concern chapters four and five, which are titled “Tradition” and “Learning” respectively (pp. 54-101). In Tradition, Baldacchino (2020) discusses the *epoché* method. It consists of holding tradition as a way of taking distance from a case: “[B]y either looking at the case from a very different angle through a different language or a distant historical model, or by pushing the concepts to their limit in ways that were effective inasmuch as they were highly original or unconventional” (p. 54). This means that Illich does not use tradition in an orthodox manner by enforcing something written in the past into the present like some extreme readings of the *Bible* do to characterize current social issues and inequalities. On the contrary, Illich pursued readings of traditional texts as a way of avoiding a quick, ideologic, or excessively utilitarian interpretation of a subject. As Baldacchino writes, Illich “takes the experience of subjects onto horizons that are neither idealized nor measured by the empirical tools by which, so

often, practicism reifies human experience” (p. 55). In this section, Baldacchino recovers a passage from *The Church, Change and Development* (Illich, 1970) that I found especially remarkable, where Illich stated, “this experience is not available through the study tables but through the celebration of shared experience: dialogue, controversy, play, poetry; in short: *self-realisation in creative leisure*” (p. 18, emphasis added by Baldacchino).

The concept of *epoché* and the method of pushing concepts to the limits or placing them into unexpected horizons are central to understanding how Illich approaches the concepts of schooling and deschooling. Illich was interested in questioning the societal conditions that shape education in a given form that schools society. By schooling, Illich and Baldacchino refer to the commodification of education as a form of resourcing human capital, of thinking of education as a form of measured activity, whose results condition the type of provision offered. In this way, education is “a mechanism of scarcity” (p. 56) that becomes endemic when the process of schooling is decided by the state or other forms of governance external to its constituents that organize around universal modes of provision and development. Those who do not fit or progress according to the standards or the desired outputs are either considered “irrelevant to the economy” (p. 58) or need to go through adaptations that allow them to catch up with the enforced model. This means that policies of special education or alternative schooling or initiatives of home schooling may rebalance the model, but they do not necessarily challenge it. This is so because in these policies and practices, the institutional vision of what stands for education and learning remains tied to schooling.

Thus, Illich seeks a decoupling of schooling from the concepts of education and learning, prompting the reader to think on these concepts against each other in a dialectical way.

Baldacchino (2020) writes:

In a schooled society, learning, education and schools are conveniently exchanged, synonymized and thereby distorted by the lack of dialectical process. This leaves teaching at the receiving end of a systematic act that decimates its essential role. Diminished in this way, teaching as an art becomes a luxury reserved to those schools where education is afforded only relatively freedom to allow teachers to exercise a portion of their creative, let alone, subversive and radical ability to lead the young through questioning the world. (p. 58)

Illich's critique resonates with the tacit acceptance in late capitalist societies that schools are an unquestionable and necessary priority that enable social and personal progress. We have seen the prevalence of this type of discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic with leaders like Prime Minister Boris Johnson in the UK, but also in other countries, repeatedly affirming that schools are the last thing to close. This included raging pandemic periods when everything else had been in lockdown. Politicians have explained that closing schools involves children missing education, which in turn has been equated to missing social opportunity and putting children at higher risk. Such discourse reflects little on the likely possibility that children continued learning when they were not at schools. By mapping learning to schooling, learning is disconnected from experience. Experience is mundane, emplaced, ongoing—and thus immanent—and not exclusively dependent on being at school. During the pandemic children have accumulated many experiences, some have been life changing with ontogenetic effects in their development as individuals. The treatment of schools, children, and families during the COVID-19 pandemic is a very vivid example of Illich's argument about the need to detangle education and learning from schooling, and to think and value notions of learning that are more local and autonomous. As Baldacchino (2020) explains, Illich did not seek to abolish schools but to deschool them. Instead, he

sought to disestablish the institutionalization of knowledge, so teaching and learning could be re-formed (take a new form) in dialog with present and local conditions, so emergence, spontaneity, and playfulness could be at the center of education.

Personally, I thought that Illich's ideas on disestablishment and bringing freedom and autonomy into teaching-learning resonated with art educator Dennis Atkinson's (2018) recognition of how in the regime of economised and technical education, the arts have been marginalized from the school curriculum in many countries. However, in this marginalization, Atkinson saw an opportunity to teach-learn "without criteria" (p. 5), and towards a "dissensual pedagogy" (p. 5) where art can help us think in "the different ways in which teaching and learning and its outcomes may emerge" (p. 6). For Atkinson (2018), learning art may involve "responding effectively to the different ways in which learning encounters are manifested in their outcomes and to the evolving sensibilities of learners in their changing social milieus" (p. 6). In tune with Illich and Baldacchino's (2020) aim of setting concepts to their limits, Atkinson suggests seeing the pairing of art and education as being in a paradox. In this paradox, art could certainly be reduced to the economized and technical idea of schooling, but art can also bring education to detach from its transcendental criteria and connect to local practices that "lead to new or modified capacities to learn or to teach" (p. 4).

I feel that Atkinson's idea of how art can help us attend to local and unexpected styles of learning lends well to thinking about Illich's idea of contingency. This is the notion that reality brings a number of synchronic possibilities that we should attend to and about which we should exercise ethical choices. In Illich's case, the notions of choice and freedom are conceived through the figure of the Samaritan who personally exercised the freedom to help a dying Jew, a foreign citizen beaten and abandoned outside the walls of the city. So,

for Illich, choosing to care or choosing to teach cannot rely on technical, general, disembodied, distanced plans no matter how charitable or progressive they may seem. On the contrary, caring and teaching involve being embodied and immanent to time and place as dispositions that allow the choice of caring for cases outside the law, the curriculum, or the standards, in the same way the Jew stood outside the walls of the city. Thus, Illich suggests a certain amount of autonomy, even anarchy, in which education is actively separated from schooling through acts of teaching and learning that are immanent and that extend the horizon of subjects and concepts to what has not been envisioned yet.

In summary, *Educing Ivan Illich* is a thought-provoking and stimulating book that pushes the reader to challenge cherished assumptions in education, politics, and existence in general. It is rich in concepts and philosophical conversations that multiply illuminate Illich's currency and power to think through the contexts affecting education today, with a radicalism that at the same time involves undoing "ready-made assumptions of what radical philosophy should be" (Baldacchino, 2020, p. 161).

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