

Art Thinking

The Uruguayan artist discusses art education and activism, and his newly published collection of writings *One Number is Worth One Word*.

Luis Camnitzer interviewed by Nick Thurston



The discovery of geometry, 1978

Nick Thurston: You studied at the *Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes* in Montevideo, Uruguay, in the 1950s and became involved in a student-led struggle for change that seems to have been formative for you as an artist and educator. Can you tell me what the pedagogic model for art education was there and then, and what exactly you were rebelling against?

Luis Camnitzer: I always liken what we inherited to the French Academy, but it was actually closer to André Lothe's studio-atelier model. The most avant-garde artist in the faculty was Miguel Angel Pareja. During my studies he was working in Paris as an assistant to Fernand Léger, but he had influenced the generation before mine to think about curriculum reform.

The school was structured into independent ateliers with a master teacher who formed students according to his image – and they were all men. There were three media options, painting, sculpture and, in the fifth year, printmaking. Three theory classes were taught, one year each: anatomy, art history and pedagogy. I studied in the most aesthetically conservative studio, sculpture. The last of my three teachers was a Stalinist social realist. He was one of the best teachers I ever had.

Our struggle was to overturn that very academic structure, which was run as a middle school by the

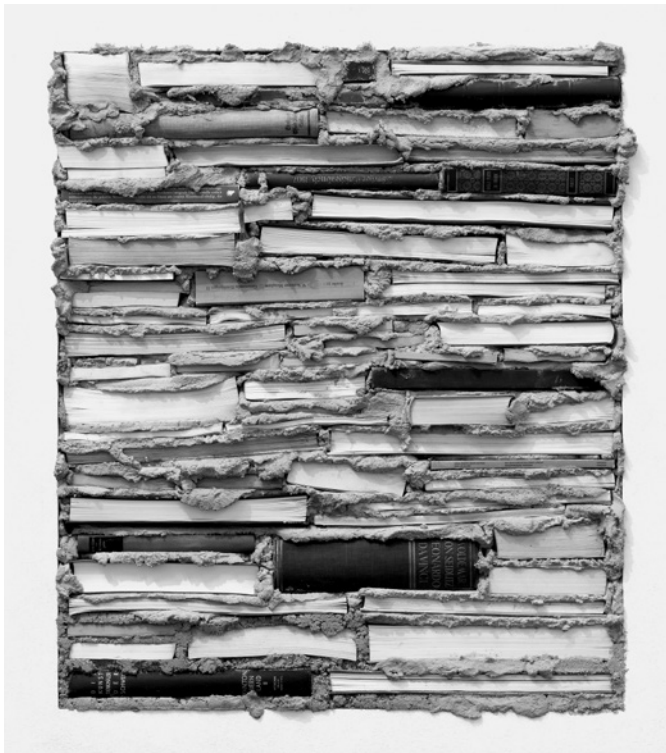
Ministry of Culture and Education. Our strongest influence was probably Johannes Itten's 'Vorkurs' model, and a general idea of erasing the difference between the fine and applied arts.

Was your group's push for art education reform local, national or international?

It was local in the sense that we had a very local problem. Our first fight was to convince legislators to complete a legal change, to have the art school and music conservatory become part of the National University. We achieved that in 1957. I benefited personally from that because suddenly, aged 19, I had three years of university credits to my name.

The implications of the reform were national because it was the only art school in the country. The only alternative art education was offered by the very dogmatic atelier of Torres García. There were no private universities.

It was international in the sense that we all believed that art was an international language of sorts. National glories such as Comte de Lautréamont, Pedro Figari, Rafael Barradas and Joaquín Torres-García were so because of their international reputations. Others who did not have that recognition still tried to measure up to the international canon and



Fenster (Ventana, Window), 2001-02/2010

be judged by it. Also, during the 1950s, the São Paulo Biennial became our international reference point. We tried to organise visits, given that our art history classes barely reached the Renaissance.

In any case, the reform was not really about aesthetics. We wanted a new pedagogical approach, and for that we looked at Montessori, Dewey and other non-art educators as much as art schools.

To what extent did the campaign connect with a broader art scene, or a struggle for changes in art beyond the academy?

Looking back, I think we were as dogmatic and self-enclosed as everybody else. As a student movement we were part of the Latin American tradition connected to the Córdoba reform, which started in Argentina in 1918. We believed in co-government of the school and in the autonomy of universities. Politically, we were what you can call ethical anarchists, influenced by authors like Peter Kropotkin, Bertrand Russell, Martin Buber and Herbert Read. In art we were against politicised government patronage and art commerce, and we boycotted both the national art salon and the gallery system. I had gone to New York for the first time in 1962 and was lucky to have MoMA buy two prints of mine. When I returned, I was accused of betraying our principles. In terms of militancy we were close to the Student Federation and therefore we were also part of the national student-worker movement.

Our aim was to improve Uruguayan society in the context of Latin Americanism and the third position, Third World international politics of non-alignment as proposed in the Bandung Conference of 1955. All these concerns meant that we were not that interested in aligning with any particular avant-garde movement, but more focused on social change through creativity.

You had been an exchange student in Munich in 1957. Did that experience have any bearing on how you thought about art education, or indeed art?

Yes, that year was very important for me, though more on a personal level than in terms of art education. I was supposed to become an architect so I applied to the Ulm School of Design, which was the inheritor of the Bauhaus. But Ulm turned me down so I landed in the Academy of Munich instead, in the atelier of Heinrich Kirchner. I liked his sculpture and also him as a person, but he was not very interactive as a teacher, which meant that I was on my own.

By accident I ended up doing some work in the printmaking studio. I made lino- and wood-cuts, and a few months later I received the Academy printmaking award. Then I was included in the 800th anniversary of the Munich art exhibition. That meant, at age 20, I had been declared a printmaker.

Munich itself was a dismal place, still physically and mentally ravaged by the war. My classmates were totally ignorant of the Bauhaus's achievements and in general I felt that I was coming from a sophisticated place into a cultural wilderness, in terms of music, politics and art. My aesthetic sensibility was seeded in Uruguay with the way I used clay to extract a version of figurative expressionism from the material. When I switched to printmaking, I just started ripping the material off the surface instead of cutting it with gouges and scalpels.

In 1968, pretty soon after you emigrated to the US, you turned down an offer to lead a new college art department. By then you had already decided that art should be understood as an attitude within any education system - what you later call a 'metadiscipline'. Can you tell me why you said no, and why you then changed your mind?

I did not see much point in having art production as an educational goal. Instead, I figured that integrating the eccentricity that comes from thinking artistically into the study of traditional disciplines would enrich those fields and mean the students would be truly educated to think on their own. I did not want to be confined to an art ghetto in academia.

The new college seemed to offer that opportunity. Originally the plan was to have a general studies programme, a disciplines programme and an urban studies programme. It was expected that I would join the disciplines programme but instead I asked to join urban studies. Slowly, the school broke up into traditional departments and I finally ended up with a visual arts department by default. Later, I tried to merge it with a politics, economics and society programme, but negotiations failed.

Over the decades, what became the barriers to establishing or defending a more horizontal 'co-learning and mentoring' model of teaching art in the US?

It was probably neoliberalism creeping into our deepest ways of thinking and acting. Somehow the notion took hold that an artist should be an individual entrepreneur who needed training in business and business relations. This happened without us realising its significance. We started a transdisciplinary course of studies that came to include problem-based, one-to-one tutorials. But very soon we also focused on an exit period with outside projects, how to organise solo shows, preparing a portfolio, psyching out gallerists and optimising tax reports for one's own benefit. Student expectations eventually forced us to train technicians by primarily teaching skills.

Ethical anarchism wants to make power visible and invalidate it so that it falls by its own weight, which requires awareness. That is why true education, as opposed to training, is so important.

The transdisciplinary co-learning situation was easier to maintain in foundation courses. The sheer volume of students was our excuse. The closest thing I can think of today is Roy Ascott's 'Groundcourse' model from the 1960s, although I did not know it at the time. The other British reference was the 19th-century Lancastrian System of using students to teach students, except Joseph Lancaster used whips and wanted to instil memorisation and comprehension. Instead, we used co-learning to maintain some pedagogical sanity.

In stark contrast to the transversal, attitudinal role that you think art should have within educational systems, you have said that in the current education system 'art is treated like a leisure activity'. Can you expand on that?

Not just in the educational system - it happens in daily life. Art is like every other spectacle presented for consumption. It is still not acknowledged as a way of accessing and processing information and expanding knowledge. Outside a narrow rarefied professional field, art is still taught as craft instruction focused on production, following old-fashioned ideas of education: education prepares for work, and free time is a respite so that one can return to work in better condition. Leisure is just a work-supporting device. And within that idea of leisure, art is ranked at the lowest level, a sort of leisure-within-leisure or sub-leisure distraction.

Leisure is just a work-supporting device. And within that idea of leisure, art is ranked at the lowest level, a sort of leisure-within-leisure or sub-leisure distraction. I think one of the problems is that education is still based on mastering what is known rather than exploring what is not known. In that sense, education is constructed on the past and art is considered a part of that past, with little practical application in a society that is focused on instrumentalisation. But, if art is a metadiscipline for cognition, it is the only one that can enable us to explore the unknown future and look for tentative - or what Stuart Hall called 'ephemeral' - closures. This kind of art would help us to continually disarticulate and rearticulate those systems that currently seem so permanent and oppressive. I would not call that leisure. I would call it trying to survive.



A Museum is a School, 2009-

Already in 1980, with your solo 'pedagogical' show in Wiesbaden, Germany, you were exploring how art might lose 'its definition as such and become art education'. Can you tell me how education became a subject-matter or aim - or even a responsibility - in your own art-making?

From the moment I started to work with language early in 1966, it became clear that art itself was a pedagogical tool. Until then, although I believed that what I did in the classroom was part of my art-making, I had not clearly seen the reverse. Realising that the work of art does not happen in the object but in the viewer clarified the issue for me.

In 1976 I had a show in a gallery in Wiesbaden and met Ulrich Schmidt, who was the director of the local museum. We planned the exhibition of 1980. The show integrated assignments I had been giving my students since the 1960s with works that I had shown as art, plus other works that I prepared especially for the exhibition.

What slowly became clear to me is that it was not about art education but about education, and that the artwork can be a transdisciplinary starter for education so long as it does not get locked into a straight-jacket by art appreciation.

I wonder whether you think there is any special connection between conceptualism and what you call 'art's main strengths - speculation, imagination, and its questions of "what if?"'

I never liked the term Conceptual Art. It both became recognised as a style and also inclined artists to look for some absolute essence of art. Unknowingly, it became a mystical quest, one often formalised on grid paper.

But conceptualism covered the idea of strategy and political action, and liberated us from predetermined visual results. The formal rule was minimum input for maximum output. It was informed by a poverty of resources and the need for consciousness-raising and empowerment. It forced us to deal with problem solving and the viewing - or view - of art, which became the basis for an all-encompassing approach by which one negotiates with reality to see what is possible and what is not.

This is what I later called 'art thinking'. Its process identifies obstacles to the full implementation of the concept: why certain obstacles are there, who put them there and what interests they serve. It was practical and political. This mode of problem-oriented thinking in art started six decades ago and produced an irreversible rupture in how we look at art. It introduced problematisation as a general condition. So, today, when we look at any work of the past and go beyond hedonism, we ask, or should ask: what problem is that piece solving? Is the problem interesting to us, and is this work the best solution? Posing and answering these questions are entangled with the imagination and bound by the present. Problematisation breaks from knowledge of the past. The artwork becomes a shared platform for asking the unknown.

That is why I believe that the history of art should be taught from the perspective of the present onto the past, and not as a nice linear chronology based on narratives of cause and effect. Unfortunately, I could never find an art historian willing to really teach it that way.

Was there any correlation between your changing feelings towards art education and the big shifts in your art-making over the years?

My ideas about art education and education have been fairly consistent over six decades, just honed. Art-making was different. The first big shift was from sculpture to printmaking, which coincided with my decision to share power with materials and tools, to be part of a team with them. I realised that cutting expressed the tool and ripping expressed the material, which reinforced my political views. The second shift came later when I decided that I did not want to be a printmaker trying to make art, but an artist who used printmaking when needed. Meanwhile, my teaching had always been problem oriented, stressing what to do over how to do, and focusing on how to problematise one's tools. When I taught etching for the first time in 1960, we would first make pancakes using the press, then bake them on the aquatint hotplate. Until the end of 1965 I felt that my art and my teaching were out of sync, like I was running behind myself without listening to my own advice. Meanwhile, my prints were getting bigger and bigger because there was no risk anymore, and I was receiving some recognition. So the third big shift came after a crisis. I started using descriptions and instructions (in language or otherwise) to enable the creative process to happen in the viewer. That brought everything together. From then on it has been a matter of becoming clearer about that, which is a process I am still working on.

The idea of ethical anarchism seems to be a gravitational force that keeps all of your obsessions in orbit. At a kind of meta-level, is that what connects your teaching and art-making, and everything else you do, such as your extraordinary para-scholarly work?

Yes, I think so. Power is used as a discrete thing to be owned and only possibly, reluctantly, minimally doled out. That has always been problematic for me. I think anarchy has a bad reputation in ignorant circles because they use the few who tried to rip apart power structures with violence as representative examples of the whole. Ethical anarchism wants to make power visible and invalidate it so that it falls by its own weight, which requires awareness. That is why true education, as opposed to training, is so important. We should develop critical thinking about critical thinking; focus not just on pedagogy but on critical pedagogy. We have to be able to identify and challenge borders.



The American Star (Captain Riley), 1990

For example, the 'Global Conceptualism' exhibition in 1999 was part of this. It was about decentering hegemony, horizontally appreciating all the art provinces, all to invalidate dominance and the category of centre vs periphery. *Didactics of Liberation, 2007*, was about researching the genealogy of Latin American conceptualism within a Latin American purview, reaching back to the 19th century instead of accepting the hegemonic origin story of Conceptual Art. The pedagogical curatorship of the 2007 Biennial of Mercosur and then the Ibere Camargo Foundation in Porto Alegre around 2008 were about using educational means to take the emphasis away from the artist and put it on the public.

Have you always felt comfortable writing? And what languages do you think and write in?

Yes - I never considered it a separate trade, it was just another medium to address a problem with if that problem could not be solved in a better way with any other medium.

For a long time, I only thought in Spanish. When an English text was needed, I wrote in Spanish and then translated it. My wife, who is a native English speaker, would then have to go over the result and correct it. It drove her crazy, so I started to write directly in English.

That gave her back part of her sanity but she still edits my writing. The process is actually great because she is very rigorous and challenges my sloppiness and my ideas. I often have to translate things back into Spanish for added clarity, but that back and forth is very useful. Languages differ so much. Travelling from one to the other each time forces a revision not only of terms but also of thoughts.

Art objects are not art. Art objects are nothing more than by-products of art. That does not mean we should stop producing them, it only means we should become aware of why we produce them, and how language is distorted right now to disempower us as co-learners.

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