

TEACHING TO LEARN (A CONVERSATION ABOUT 'HOW' AND 'WHY')

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Don't, for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense!
But you must pay attention to your nonsense.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

It seems we begin with two points: an institution and a conversation. An art school, simply put, is a representative of the institutionalization of art. It represents the world as a collection of rules, practices, traditions, habits—about art—that are organized within a social order. The presumptions and prescriptions that are taught there are a de facto description of what art is. When you describe art, you are also describing how meaning is produced, and subjectivity is formed. In other words you are describing reality. By teaching a description of reality you are engaged in constructing it, and in this sense an art school is a political institution as much as a cultural one (insofar as one can separate them to begin with)..

The conversation is inherited along with the institution (they form part of it) but that discourse is formed, possibly transformed, by the living. The discourse, when it is the choosing of how art is to be made, takes a certain form, prioritizes certain meanings. The most prevalent institutionalized form has been a concept of art which presumes itself to be either painting or sculpture. In order to liberate art from such a formalistic and prescriptive self-conception it was the agenda of work such as mine in the mid-sixties to critique that institution while it simultaneously provided an alternative to it. Any other role envisioned for art by necessity follows this transformation of our conception of it. For art schools then, as for art, there is really only one process: this is a questioning process as to art's nature. This inquiry itself constitutes an institutional critique because the art student then sees his or her activity as being less one of learning a craft or trade (how) but rather as one which is fundamentally philosophical (why).

Since the role of all institutional forms is inherently conservative there is a process basic to an art school which attempts to promulgate and preserve whatever other institutionalized forms of culture exist concurrent with it. Thus, the prescriptive nature of an art school based on

craft and tradition (or an updated version of that) means, that the institution is there to provide the answers as to what art is. In other words it engages in legitimizing the status quo of existing forms and norms: they know what art is and they are simply teaching it. This attitude teaches the inherited past of the art school. From the guilds of artists and craftsmen to the Academy and then the trade school in the recent past, artists have been taught how to make art, but not to ask why. Inquiries of a more philosophical nature have been seen as the preserve of the university and not appropriate to the 'trade school' demands of teaching the artist. What this has also taught, however, is that art—and culture itself—is apolitical. Importantly, even profoundly, this view, not limited to institutions as you will see, sees art's process itself as apolitical. Whether the content of an artwork is politicized or not is less of a problem for the institutionalized view of art than artworks that do not leave intact their conception of what art is, and by extension, what an art school should be. In this way such artworks question their authority, a much more political act than the symbolic 'acting-out' of the use of political content within an artwork which, as art, does not question its own institutional presumptions.

As I see it, then, the teaching of art is an important part of the production of art. In many ways it is the tableau where society, in practical terms, makes visible the limits of its conception of art as it attempts to regenerate the institutional forms that depict its self-conception. When our view of art is limited, so is our view of society. If questions aren't asked in art schools, away from the conservative heat of the art market, where then? If the political responsibility of a cultural reflexivity (why) is not taught along with a knowledge of the history of how artists have made meaning, then we are doomed to be oppressed by our traditions rather than informed by them. The teacher of art, as a teacher and an artist, can do no more than participate with the students in asking the questions. This, rather than attempting to provide the answers as art schools traditionally do, realigns the priorities from the beginning. The first lesson, taught by example, is that what is to be learned is a process of thinking and not a dogma in craft or theory.

The teacher is not the representative of the institution, hut one artist among several sharing a conversation. What is said has its own weight. If a teacher is any good he or

she learns as much as the students. The 'answers', if there are any, are formed by all of the participants in the conversation within the context of their own lives, and their practical effect only within that larger conversational process; the shared discourse of a community. It is in the making of meaning—art—as a discourse that art students experience themselves as they begin the process of making the world. The concept of art shared by such a teaching process has institutional critique basic to it, but, by necessity it must avoid that as its sole description. Because art is the teaching of art (although the format changes), description quickly becomes prescription. What this concept of art really reflects is the responsibility of the artist to be a whole person: a political being as well as a social and cultural one.

Joseph Kosuth: 'Art after philosophy and after: collected writings, 1966-1990', MIT Press, 1991