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**Editorial –
“Artistic
Thinking”**

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e-flux journal #26 — June 2011
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In the February 2009 issue of *e-flux journal*, Luis Camnitzer suggested in his essay “Art and Literacy” that a core problem in education (particularly for artists) can be traced back to an early stage when one is taught to read and write, in that order.¹ On one level, it is simple common sense to suppose that one can only begin to write after learning how to read. But, at the same time, this ordering also takes for granted that consumption must necessarily come before production – only after you consume knowledge will you then be capable of producing it. It is a fundamental understanding of learning that is typical of the master-apprentice model found in craft guilds. The problem arises when the language to be learned has not yet been invented, or the practice of a craft is not controlled by a guild.

Art education, on the other hand, has deeply internalized this problem by taking the inverse for granted – that one writes first, and only later develops a language with which to read what was written. What would it mean, then, to then build an institution around this idea? Such an institution would necessarily be ahistorical, and perhaps even amnesiac. It would resemble a Tower of Babel, in which each work could be understood as its own language, projecting its own art history.

In the past few years, debates around art education have experienced a gradual, yet determined drift from an interest in open formats and the emancipatory potentials of semi-institutional structures, to discussions of how those educational institutions can be optimized, or even standardized. One can easily dismiss this shift towards pragmatism for reflecting an endemic crisis of the imagination – and it probably does, but it is also a necessarily concrete response to very real threats to art education that have come in the form of severe budget cuts and sweeping measures to bring art production in line with the broader administrative mandates of research universities.²

Yet the field of art is not set up to deal with these administrative challenges, for it refuses to offer a definitive answer to the question of what it is actually doing: the question “What is art?” must be left open. The more important and interesting question then concerns not the prudishness of this refusal, but the fact that the most useful answers are always provided in the negative. These are the answers that account for the fact that art education is, in fact, a fundamental paradox – almost a contradiction in terms. For how can we even begin to think about teaching something that, on a basic level, cannot be taught? How to form the audacity to make moves that have not been already sanctioned,

and within spaces where they may not be acceptable? Fostering this audacity is less a structural concern – of how to deal with a given space, of how to access a history or a network of relations, of how to make work visible, and so forth – and more a question of identifying the kind of thinking that can surpass structures and institutionalization altogether. We might call this artistic thinking.

On the one hand, following from Camnitzer, granting the artist a position that precedes language (and, by extension, history), while opening a large space for experimentation, could be seen as a tediously romantic endorsement of the artist as mad genius – unaccountable and unaware of the vocabularies that have consolidated around him or her. But would this not be another way of describing an already-existing hysteria embedded in a field where all legitimating mechanisms are subject to highly contingent and subjective impressions and projections of value and importance? While we could say that a vocabulary exists for linking these together, it still does not manage to form a coherent language of judgment, of totalizing denouncement or terms that could otherwise measure the definitive success or failure of a work of art. This could be the source of a good amount of psychosis, but it would be even more insane to suggest that a central authority *should* form a central criterion of aesthetic judgment as a template for all. And anyhow, art at its best does not provide answers and solutions; it creates problems.

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1
See <http://e-flux.com/journal/view/42>.

2
See “Education Actualized,” Irit Rogoff’s guest-edited issue of *e-flux journal* from March 2010, for a number of in-depth analyses of these currents: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/issue/14>.