

Luis Camnitzer
**Escuela
Nacional de
Bellas Artes**

01/05

In 1958, thanks to the efforts of its students and the Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios del Uruguay, the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (ENBA) in Montevideo was integrated into the national university. This allowed students and graduates to participate in the government of the school and to effect curricular reform in a hitherto extremely conservative art academy. The text below was an attempt to bring together collective ideas and suggestions that could structure that reform. Some students had already started to work on this in the early fifties. Until 1958 the school had been rigidly controlled by the Ministry of Education and Culture, which had made change impossible. This is an abridged text composed of fragments from the much longer document which I have translated from the original Spanish. Footnotes have been added for the reader's benefit.

I don't believe that there is any other aesthetic premise than freedom, as much personal as collective. As this is also an ethical premise, I don't believe that one can detach aesthetic premises from pedagogical methodologies. In reference to art, leaving aside any precise definition, I understand that it should be a universal form of expression, since every action should be aesthetic and everything should be creative. The opposite is neutral and stagnant. I understand that there is no "anti-art" but, if anything, there is an "other-art" with the same rights and validity.

Undoubtedly, the most common means of expression is the word. It's misused and abused. It determines thought rather than being a consequence of it. Metaphors have become formal sentences that have lost their original image, and that is how we think.

The academy tends to undergo this same process in other forms of artistic expression. It is a totalitarian process, inasmuch as it tries to annul individual creativity and impose an ultimate and absolute truth. Technique tends to repeat that same process in the other forms of expression by forcing alienated structures onto the individual rather than allowing the individual to challenge, change, and create structures.

From an ideal point of view, the classification of "artistic" and "non-artistic" forms of expression is as arbitrary and absurd as the classification of "major" and "minor" art forms. I understand that the ENBA must eradicate this division. In saying this I'm also saying that art is an attitude and, following this, that it is an attitude of freedom (which is obviously an engagement; freedom is the correct use of individual potential). And in a panorama that comprises "word," "academy," and "technique," art is a warmongering attitude, where the weapon serves as much to kill as to

e-flux journal #107 — march 2020 Luis Camnitzer
Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes

give birth.

I understand that every human being is able to express him- or herself artistically. It is done to a greater or lesser degree, or it's not done at all (a case I consider hypothetical) depending on the interference of academies, of empty forms, and of prejudice, all of which generally hamper natural development.

I understand that there are individuals with a greater potential for sensitivity than others, although I also believe that sensitivity can be developed. A child is not considered to be a valid artist only because their position is not validated by the community. The same is true of the mentally impaired, but they too are capable of expressing their sensitivities without being inhibited by superstructures.

As Maria Montessori wrote: "Free drawings are only possible if we have a free child who was allowed to grow and perfectly assimilate the surrounding environment ... and who, left free to create and express, really creates and expresses."¹ I understand that this is equally true of adults, and this should be one of the fundamental tenets for the pedagogy at the ENBA. Our society is not composed of "free children," nor are those who will attend our school "free." The school has to transform them and give them the strength to transform others. For that it has to return to them the capacity for original and primitive experience, the capacity to renew their naivety, the capacity for unprocessed feelings, discovery, invention, and play in Fröbel's sense.² The First Period of the ENBA [curriculum] achieves some of this by introducing the student to different techniques and materials in order to define a path. Or better, a sensorial orientation.³

This sensorial orientation should be intensified during the Fundamental Studios [the Second Period of the curriculum]. Here the instructors will be better equipped than the technicians [in the First Period] to calibrate the needs of the student, since the student will already have some idea of their own direction and a panoramic overview of a vast range of materials that will allow, at any moment, for synthesis (a minimum to be demanded from the Second Period). This means that everything will be reflected in the student's attitude toward the material. The choice of material will no longer be arbitrary, but has to be directed first toward the achievement of a pure experience and then toward a special experience. This is what will define the Fundamental Sculpture Studio, as long as this title is not limited by the historical meaning of the words.

The student will aim at a total revision of herself and of her relations with the environment. These relations will no longer be reduced to a chain of actions governed by the

need for subsistence and replicating the market. Instead they will express the militancy that arises automatically between an individual aware of freedom and an environment of oppression.

In the case of sculpture, it's no longer about making equestrian monuments, intimate portraits, or objects for the shelf, all of which subordinate space to their own existence. Sculpture has to create spaces, not subordinate them. It must take a human scale, and the militancy that corresponds to it is an education that refuses hyper- and infrahuman scales. It is in this sense that a science of design following the ideas of Gropius may have validity. But we should go even further. It's not about creating spaces for the people, but about teaching people to create their own spaces. It's only from here that artists may spring onward, owing to a higher degree of specialization and vocation, and not because of accident ("my son draws very well") or manual skills. This is the only way an artist can be a normal human being, like a shoemaker, whose higher degree of professionalization is indispensable for the community. Klee once said: "We have all the conditions to be artists, what we lack is a people." In our case we have the conditions for neither, and their formation is closely linked.

Let's now discuss the organization of the Fundamental Sculpture Studio. For this there are two considerations: the studio is a community of shared interests, and it's also a conglomerate of individuals. This will be reflected in both team activities and individual works, beyond permanent group discussions. The work plan sketched out here is open to revisions and changes according to group discussions and individual needs (a discussion, by the way, should not necessarily be limited to the use of words). The plan for the studio has two areas: one is the more or less animalistic relation with the material, with a slow integration of connective and formal elements; the other, with a plastic intention, goes from formal speculation to the placement in the environment (which for some may be a further development of the formal speculation). It is in this second area where the individuality of the student may offer some danger to the instructor. At this stage, the student's confidence is still fragile when self-criticism is applied to their intuitive instruments rather than their practical decisions, as was the case in the first area. A lack of doubt may lead to the wrong path, and an excess of doubt may inhibit the work.

I understand that, at moments like this, it's useful for the instructor to delineate the basic limits of each student. Not dividing by type along Kretschmer's or Jung's categories, which done

02/05

e-flux journal #107 — march 2020
Luis Camnitzer
Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes

without proper knowledge may be too schematic, but by studying the student's reactions when confronted with specific problems, including the use of tests. Without the use of complex tools like Rorschach blots, one may reach conclusions by comparing a drawing by the student with his or her handwriting (looking at consistency, conventionality in either, family influence in the handwriting, etc.); by gauging their reaction when having to fill space (fear, shyness, crowding, or emptiness); or their representation in a self-portrait (for example, the placement within a rectangular frame of a profile implies inhibitions). With these elements one may avoid undesirable dead ends for the student, and find a path by construction rather than by destruction (like those students who have to overcome academic training).

The first step in the studio is creating an original experience of the material. The student will take a piece of clay and press it through his fingers, tear off pieces, feel it with more and less water. Splinter a piece of wood in different directions; tear and fold a sheet of paper; dent and perforate metal; let ink drip into water; create smoke and move it into shapes. There will be an immediate critical reaction that will define a basic sensorial range: viscous, soft, etc.; and a second comparative one: dry, humid, wet. Each student will draw personal theoretical conclusions from this. They should be written down and fed into teamwork, where the work will be complemented [by the experiences of the group]. A second step in this will be to allow materials to generate their own forms: shapes that were created during the first step, but that hadn't been properly focused on. The results will present texture and structure problems. Texture will be explored by repeating the first step and by grouping the results of different materials: fabric, glass, sandpaper, brick, etc. After a period of individual research, the team will classify the experiences according to different criteria: smooth to rough, glossy to matte, etc. Individually again there will be experimentation with structure, like paper balls, fabric extended in space, and so on. The structure problem will be solved by making constructions that minimize waste, from mountains and stalactites made with wet sand, to towers made with sticks, folded paper structures that bear weight, and self-supporting wire structures. The difference between the first and second becomes blurred, and the next step is to compose and to integrate basic functions: shapes made to touch, to roll, to push, activities that merge with the material. The results will be classified individually and collectively into collections. The cultural history instructor will help situate the experience in the context of the histories of different cultures.⁴ At

the same time the geometry instructor will discuss geometric and non-geometric connections, and present exercises in topological geometry.

The following work is about mixed structures in which forms and textures are combined, and also considers the colors of the materials: for example, finding four materials in the garden to build a vertical structure.

Over time, academic art favored some materials over others based on their physical durability. This created a dogmatic faith in some materials over others and precludes the free use of new materials. The process of study here tries to reconsider this hierarchy. Newsprint is a material as valid as gold and, according to how it's used, may have more expressive possibilities. It's only beyond a certain level of progress in the aims of expression that durability may become an issue. While a scientific research into the durability of a material is beyond the requirements of the Fundamental Studio, it may be picked up later in the specific Technical Studios according to the student's interest and the practical resources of the school. In the event that the school doesn't have the facilities to address the research, links with commercial industries or the Industrial School should be set up, but always under supervision of the corresponding ENBA instructor.

The problems that ensue are spatial. The student will evolve forms, first in two dimensions, to understand the essence of the assignment, and then in three dimensions, to study its kinetic aspects. In the first case a basic shape will be drawn (triangle, square, etc.) to study variations on the page: square, square with open side, broken open side, different angles, etc. In the second case, different materials will be used. A wire square may be deformed into different shapes without cutting the wire. The same may be done with an open square, to be closed after it has been deformed. Different rules may be introduced (taking a square without adding or subtracting material, but introducing cuts into the surface).

The next series of assignments studies light and shadow. The student determines a desired shape for a shadow and builds a structure that, using a fixed light source, casts a shadow to fit the shape. After a first trial, the next step includes predetermined shadows on and between the things used. The exercise will be repeated as teamwork.

I consider education toward teamwork to be crucial, as a problem's complexity often surpasses the ability of a single individual to solve it. Teamwork is an effective instrument to bring a problem down to a manageable scale. Teams shall work horizontally, and every member

03/05

e-flux journal #107 — march 2020
Luis Camnitzer
Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes

has to participate. Later teams will be expanded to include members of other studios, so that ultimately they will be able to work with architects and industry.

Besides the development of a personal vantage point, the sensitivity of the student has to extend to the perception and digestion of the reality of the environment. For our purposes this reality has two parts: an ethical one and a plastic one. Sensitizing in the first part is the responsibility of the cultural history instructor. The second part is the responsibility of the studio instructor. This does not mean that the studio experience should extend to ingesting mescaline, but it should make it possible to reconsider previous studio experiences when confronted with everyday objects. The student should be able, imaginatively, to abstract and compose from fixed reality (meaning reality that cannot be [physically] transformed by the perceiver): to find signs, characters, and monsters, to speculate with the development of a shadow, to deform and distort spaces without touching them. This phase includes interpretive exercises in the spirit of Johannes Itten in regards to a corner of the studio, the garden, street, table, flower vase, or even a work of art. They will be expressed fundamentally through sketches. The student now will have to make sure that expression is consistent or, even more, that when confronted with existing things he or she uses consistent attitudes.

The group of students will be supplied with a phrase made up of two words which are as incommensurate as possible. Each student will have to find a mode of expression that makes them coherent, thus putting order into his universe. The words will first refer to objects (car, faucet), then in a more complex step to concepts or qualities (fatness, finality). At this point the student is already on a personal path. Corrections will eliminate any subordination of the plastic form to the natural form, trying to give the plastic form a new origin. Obsequious realism does not belong to the sphere of art. The problem is not of imitating reality, but of the translation or the direct use of things.

Maybe this is an aesthetic postulate, though for me it continues at the same time to be an ethical one. The student now is free in the sense of being able to aim the act of creation at whatever he or she pleases. It will be the student who dictates the place from which the instructor works, and any discussion of the student's production has to respect that demand, or not take place at all.

x

This text, originally written in 1960, is an excerpt from *One Number Is Worth One Word* by Luis Camnitzer, forthcoming in April 2020 from *e-flux journal* and Sternberg Press.

1

Maria Montessori, *The Advanced Montessori Method* (Montessori-Pierson, 2007), 308.

2

Friedrich Fröbel (1782–1852) was a German educationalist best known for his promotion of learning through play and the invention of the kindergarten.

3

In his *Crónicas del entusiasmo* (Banda Orintal, 2018), historian Gabriel Peluffo Linari refers to this period of the ENBA as “experimentalist.” The observation is illustrative, because the contact with the array of techniques was not intended to develop crafts, but to experience materials and dimensions.

4

The course was called “Cultural and Historical Instruction.”