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“Hey, teacher, leave us kids alone.

All in all you're just another brick in the wall.” (Pink Floyd)

On ignorance, emancipation and the art academy

by Marijke Hoogenboom

Throughout his tenure as Artist in Residence at the Amsterdam School of the Arts, Terry Barrett has introduced a challenging approach to art education and has expanded the idea of teaching art at the Amsterdam Academy of Art Education significantly. According to Barrett, future art teachers should not consider themselves as experts who tell people about art, they should rather train their communicative skills and act as facilitators of conversations “to understand and enjoy contemporary art” (Barrett 2009). Although staff, students and directors at the academy have embraced Barrett’s project *No Landscapes* and continue to apply his methods in current curricula, I am not sure if his radical position has been fully acknowledged yet. In fact, Barrett is proposing to resist what is commonly accepted educational practice and is instead suggesting to bridge the gap between pupils and teachers and to shift the attention of art education from ‘giving answers’ to ‘generating questions’. We, educators and directors at the art academy, have invited Barrett to challenge our students, but did we actually allow him to challenge ourselves?

For me, as chair of the super-faculty Art Practice and Development research group at the Amsterdam School of the Arts (that is entirely dedicated to provide the academy with impulses from the international art practice), *No Landscapes* triggers reflections on teaching and learning at large and provokes me to ask: Why is it that we want to ‘do right’ in education? What is the paradox of art education? And how can we produce

and represent knowledge creatively?¹

As educators we are – I am afraid – full of good intentions. We believe in progress: we make a conscious effort to mediate between the informed and the uninformed; we want to foster individual development and enable people to upgrade their abilities; we are interested in good people and want to make them capable citizens or professionals. We are also, and I say this without cynicism, always thinking of how to change and improve the learning environments we have created, in order to change and improve the effect they have on our students. ‘Wanting to do right in education’ means accepting the system of education and wanting to make it work. But if this approach constantly justifies itself, then one may wonder how education can be critically examined.

In his influential book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* the French philosopher Jacques Rancière tells the fictional story of Joseph Jacotot, an exiled French schoolteacher, who in 1818 devised an unconventional teaching method that caused uproar within the European academic community. Jacotot, who knew no Flemish, found himself able to teach in French to Flemish students who knew no French. Knowledge, Jacotot concluded, was not necessary to teach, neither was explication necessary to learn. The results of this unusual experiment in pedagogy led him to announce that all people were equally intelligent, and to devise a philosophy and method for what he called ‘intellectual emancipation’. Rancière's core proposition is that the school does not wish to know. It fails in the mission of reducing social and intellectual inequality because it is ignorant of the functioning of its own logic, which propagates inequality by its very efforts to mitigate it.

The enterprise of education always consists – however and wherever it is carried out – of a person or group doing the educating, and a person or group being educated. Pedagogical reason presents itself as the act that lifts the veil and reveals things. The usual mechanism is ‘explanation’. But this apparently simple concept is, on closer inspection, subject to infinite regression: explanation is generally accompanied by an explanation of the explanation, for example by educators who explain the explanation that permits the student to comprehend. And so on.

¹ More information on the AIR programme of the Art Practice and Development research group in collaboration with the institutes of the Amsterdam School of the Arts can be found on www.air.ahk.nl

In Rancière's view, school is a place where control and knowledge should come together in harmony and optimise the social function of the institution. His critique does not proscribe the construction of schools, programmes or pedagogies, but he attacks our over-inflated expectations of a school charged with overcoming the actual inequality.

So what are the consequences of the ignorant schoolmaster's work? How does he teach, in what way does he address his pupils? The method that Jacotot proposes is not spectacular at all. He simply decides not to explain, and obliges another intelligence to exercise itself – independent of any knowledge the educator possesses. It is the oldest method in the world, and it is verified daily in all circumstances where an individual must learn something when no explanation is available.

Seen in the light of Jacotot's story, 'wanting to do right in education' is apparently a trap when we do not go beyond the traditional logic of education. If a school, as a producer within society, wants to propose or provide an opportunity for emancipation, it has to reassess the functioning of the educational machine as a social machine. And it must reassess the relationship in which education takes place – the relationship between educator and student. Like Terry Barrett, I would suggest, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* bravely demonstrates how a school can consider equality not as a goal to be achieved, but as a point of departure.

In the context of educating young artists though, knowledge transfer and educational relationships seem even more problematic. At the Amsterdam School of the Arts we are fully aware that we are maintaining the illusion that we can teach students to become *personalities* and to transform their qualities into specific art practices. In fact, we deliberately chose to nurture an apparent paradox: while most would agree that there are techniques, skills and even tricks that can be taught, as Belgian dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven points out, "The construction of one's own creative method is probably one of the most intimate, personal and all-but indescribable human occupations, since it is rooted in the deepest recesses of humanity" (Van Kerkhoven 2000). Many artists feel incapable of defining their creative process and recognize that their most important work comes out of *not knowing* what they were doing at the time they were doing it. All in all, then, we are in a bit of a muddle when it comes to institutionalized art education

because there is no universally applicable formula. We must pass on our experience, but have to do it differently each time.

For the art academy then, there is but one process, that of open-minded questioning – an inquiry that is less about learning a craft or trade (the ‘how’) than it is about exploring the fundamentally philosophical (the ‘why’). The primary task of the school, and of any educator in it, is to participate with the students in posing questions and to contribute to their own creative emancipation. What this concept of art, shared by the teaching process, really reflects is “the responsibility of the artist to be a whole person, a political being as well as a social and cultural one”. (Kosuth 1992)

No Landscapes has enabled the academy to make room for differences. If we share our views, and expand our knowledge of artworks and of people who look at art, we start from the idea that art itself is not stably inserted in a knowledge system and is not limited to a set of given values. I think we are aware of the function of knowledge to gain certainty (or, if you prefer, to reduce uncertainty). In respect to art education, however, I am interested in how the complexity of knowledge can be explored in a creative way, and how teachers and students can investigate the function of knowledge together – with and through the arts.

In 1969 the American artist James Lee Byars (1932-97) realized in Belgium one of his most ephemeral art works, a performative show that was live broadcasted on local television: *The World Question Center*. Byars was calling his personal list of the 100 most brilliant minds of his time and asked what questions they were asking themselves. Among them John Cage, Luciano Berio, Joseph Beuys, Hans Hollein, Cedric Price, Robert Jungk, Marcel Broodthaers, Simon Vinkenoog and Ritsaert ten Cate. Despite the bad connections and the many people that hung up on him, Byars kept insisting: “Can you pose a question that contributes to your own evolving sense of knowledge?” Or “Would you mind telling me a question that you are asking yourself currently?” Or “I am looking for questions that are very important to individual people with regard to their own evolution, mentally - can you offer me one?” (Byars 1969) Byars did not hesitate to trust single ideas and he believed that a synthesis of all human knowledge cannot be represented as transferable information and objectified data. The political, social and cultural concerns of his time rather result in a variety of fragmented conservations: subjective, situational and communal. Byars puts forward the importance to

explore individual insights and understanding, but also ways in which new knowledge – and new art – can be produced playfully.

Honest ignorance, productive paradox and creative curiosity. I still remember how Terry Barrett encouraged the participating students of the Amsterdam Academy of Art Education at the very beginning of *No Landscapes*. And remembering his words now, I believe he did likewise address all of us, those who engage in art education as teachers, directors or researchers: “Let’s forget about teaching. Let’s for the time of the project try to not even use the word teaching. And instead: listen, wait, slow down and discover what they - our pupils - have to say.”²

Bibliography

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² Quote from notes by the author on the opening lecture of *No Landscapes* in January 2009.