

Teacher as conceptual artist



Identifying the
overlap between the
teacher/artist
identities

A project by Jorge Lucero
and the Amsterdam
University of the Arts



Research Group Arts Education &
the Artist in Residence programme

 Amsterdam University of the Arts

Teachers in arts education frequently struggle with their professional identity. Am I an artist? A performer? A teacher? When probed about the reasons for this confusion, arts teachers often answer that they believe that their main responsibility is education at the expense of understanding and promoting themselves as artists. Yet, a teacher's artistic practice contributes to the quality of teaching the arts, as teachers stay connected to developments in the arts and keep their artistic knowledge and skills up to date.

In the discussion about teacher/artist identities, the Mexican-American artist and scholar Jorge Lucero argues that the perceived gap between teacher/artist identities could be closed through an understanding of how these identities overlap and integrate into each other. Building on developments in conceptual and social art, Lucero coined the idea of *the teacher as conceptual artist*. He proposes that a teacher's practice – in and out of the classroom – can simultaneously be their creative practice. According to Lucero, redefining the school – with its proceedings, relationships, and obligations – as 'artistic material', opens up possibilities to engage in a practice in which educational and artistic goals are simultaneously pursued.

This publication is part of the research project *Teacher as conceptual artist*, initiated by the Research Group Arts Education of the Amsterdam University of the Arts. During four months, a group of arts education students explored the similarities between teaching and artistic practice. In this period, Jorge Lucero operated as Artist in Residence, coach and curator. The participating students were familiarized with Lucero's ideas through lectures, discussions and workshops. On that basis, they developed lessons, which they implemented in different schools (primary and secondary education). The students were also encouraged to pay particular attention to all the things they do as educator – especially the 'non-art' activities – as art. The results of the project were shared at a symposium and an exhibition at art center Framer Framed in Amsterdam.

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Amsterdam University of the Arts
Research Group Arts Education

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BY JORGE LUCERO

What is *teacher as conceptual artist*? *Teacher as conceptual artist* is not a method. At best, it is a filter, a way of thinking. This sounds much more pretentious than it is. *Teacher as conceptual artist* is a way of thinking about one's teaching practice/existence through the permissions of conceptual art. One of those permissions is to consistently and purposefully rethink what counts as art. If you're thinking about yourself and your practice through the *teacher as conceptual artist lens* you may consistently be asking the question, "how is this the world that I'm involved with pliable?". You encounter something – anything – and you ask yourself "how is this pliable? How does it bend? How is it made soft? How can I move it? How can I use it or think it differently?" This is not a question about the physical world, although it is a question of materiality. Pliability doesn't mean that the thing you're bending will necessarily change in the physical world, but rather will turn into your work because you have thought it through your conceptual art filter. Conceptual art gives an 'art' permission which is to enact the question of pliability outside of the insistence of the plastic arts. The teacher who practices through conceptual art detaches him or herself from mandatory craftsmanship, traditions of practice, the labor-equals-worth paradigm, and the archival. In many ways teaching as conceptual art sees everything as special, but doesn't require any kind of specialness to enact whatever is enacted.

School then becomes material. Through the permissions of conceptual art people who find themselves within institutions or frameworks of education find a path to make art – even – with the banalities and *materialities* of those very institutions. *Teaching as conceptual art* asks the questions: How is school material? How is school pliable? How is the teacher a work? How is what I'm already doing within the institution already the work I want to be doing in the world?

What permissions does conceptual art give to *teacher as conceptual artist*? Let's call them modes.

How is grading your students' work art?

MODE 2:
Attain energy via accumulation

With the passage of time – at the very least – seconds are accumulating. Breaths, interactions, gestures, movements, sounds, voices, acts of labor, commerce, etcetera. All accumulate with the mere passage of time. How many things and activities are repeated daily? How many piles exist? What does it mean to do something two times? Ten times? One hundred times? Countless times? Well, in the case of breaths, we can make the argument that the repetition of that mere banality produces a lifetime's worth of passion, joy, sadness, purpose, sensation, generosity and dreams. Accumulation needs to begin at the number one: one gesture, number one of the collection, the first time. One though, is frequently ignored, but accumulation calls attention. It's what makes the answers to prayers miraculous, what makes atoms life, what makes the everyday, art.

MODE 1:

MODE 1:
Consider the institution as material

Think about how to make the institution the material of what you are making. Here you need not just think about the objects of the institution. What are the norms and dynamics of the space that you're in? What is the special, philosophical, physical, and economic infrastructure of the institution and how can those things become your work? For example, what are the most bureaucratic things that happen in your school and how can those things become artworks? Not through destroying them or being cynical about them, but through reframing how you think about them. How are parent-teacher conferences art? How are teacher in-services art? How is grading your students' work art? How is taking attendance art? How is lesson planning art? How is cleaning your classroom art? And so on and so forth.

What does it mean to do something two times? Ten times? One hundred times?

Relationships can be between people, objects, and spaces.

MODE 4:
Co-construct

You may need a partner; someone to carry the majority of the weight. Someone to bring something to the table that you could never bring. This partner might be another person; they might be an object; they might be a location; or a time of day. Find this partner and let them give you parameters. Follow their parameters. Life is a partner. When in doubt, forget art and live life.

You might make these works in secret and never tell anybody about them.

MODE 6:
Present narratives

Learn how to tell the story and get comfortable with it. As a teacher you already know how to make the undocumentable presentable. As teachers we're constantly being asked to distill all the nuance of learning and being in relation with our students into summaries and deliverables. With conceptual art this task is the same. Hyper-document everything, write about it, steer the narrative, produce images, books, exhibitions, websites, social media posts or merely tell the story of what you've done to someone else. Or – even better – tell no one, just yourself; but learn to really tell yourself the story of what you've done.

MODE 3:
Use closeness

Even within the apparent sterility and policing of the institution there are relationships. The relationship can be intimate and they can be daily renewed. Relationships can be between people, objects, and spaces. They can be whispered in secret or pronounced publically. Closeness doesn't always have to be about physical bodies. Closeness can be one sided, if you know how to do it right. Some things can only be experienced through closeness. Some things can only be re-presented through closeness. Closeness doesn't always have to do with proximity or size. Sometimes closeness is driven by attitude and/or intention.

You may need a partner; someone to carry the majority of the weight.

MODE 5:

MODE 5:
Embrace invisibility

Some works will never be seen. You may not see them come to fruition. They might only exist in your mind. You might make these works in secret and never tell anybody about them. They might never be documented. They might fade away into memory, time, or material. You may find that no one cares. You might find that you don't even care. Indeed, you may think that this whole thing is a waste of time and energy. Even in this thought, you may have achieved something!

Learn how to tell the story and get comfortable with it.

Make school material

Work with everything

Be with everyone

Test pliability

Share resources

Show all work, all the time

Ambitiously fail

Flux curricularly

Get near

Highlight every individual

Make pairs

Touch freely

Look twice

Bracket banality

Co-construct

Listen at length

Typeface your emails

Lecture generously

Rupture normal

Erase masterpieces

Forgive fearlessly

Avoid teacherly

Plant things

Build buffets

Love like amateurs

Push off of the standard

Research everything

Play aimlessly

Read comics seriously

Write nonsense

Mush words

Take yourself seriously

Make yourself a joke

Draw on fogged glass

Run around

Invent music

Individualize uniforms

Trip through the field

Carry selflessly

Cry every time

Watch slowly

Hold conviviality

Walk as science

Weave as seeking

Politicize your personal

Stack and pile

Study breathing

Breathe while studying

Contemplate presence

Cross borders wide-eyed

Collect vocabulary

Offer time

Study etymology

Make lists

Assess with mercy

Absurd your image

Look up and down

Sit purposefully

Invent constantly

Split your lunch

Enjoy incomprehensibility

Be quiet more

Owe only love

Kindred your kindness

MODE 2:
Attain energy via accumulation

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