

Melissa Bremmer and Emiel Heijnen (AHK)  
Jorge Lucero (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

# School as material<sup>1</sup>

## Modes of operation for teachers as conceptual artists

'...my practices tread the age-old tight-rope in between the needlessly polar opposites of art and pedagogy. It is in this "tight-rope" space—this middle space—that the perfect amount of tension resides, where the art wants to become the teaching and the teaching wants to become the art' (Lucero, 2011, p. 9).

Teachers in arts education frequently struggle with their professional identity (Hatfield, Montana & Deffenbaugh, 2006; Welch, Purves, Hargreaves & Marshall, 2011). 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 themselves as artists (Hall, 2010). In this discussion about teacher/artist identities, the Mexican-American artist and scholar Jorge Lucero (2011) questions whether an occupation as teacher needs to stand in the way of nurturing a creative practice and argues that the perceived gap between teacher/artist identities could be closed through an understanding of how they overlap and integrate into each other. Lucero (2011) examined the similarities between progressive pedagogy (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1998; Pinar, 2004) and conceptual art<sup>2</sup>, and the possibility for them to become one practice. The finding that both progressive pedagogy and conceptual art have the potential to be emancipatory, people-centered and situational, formed the basis for his idea of *teacher as conceptual artist*. In short, Lucero proposes that a teacher's practice, in and out of the classroom, can be his creative practice at the same time.

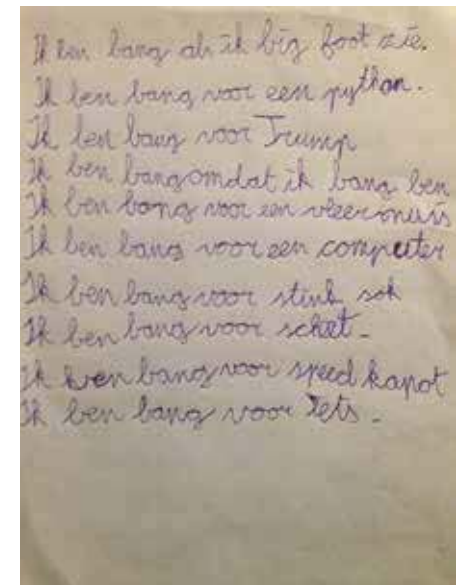
Lucero notes that *Teacher as conceptual artist* is not a method but a filter, a way of thinking about one's teaching practice/existence through the permissions of conceptual art. What is possible in art-making, could be "permissible in other practices - particularly practices that were not typically seen as aesthetic - like pedagogy" (Lucero, 2011, p. 25), or practices such as activism, cleaning, health, design, cooking and business. Thus, conceptual art could give 'permissions' to the field of teaching that provide teachers with modes of operating that are similar to those of conceptual artists. One of those permissions is to consistently and purposefully rethink what counts as art. 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.

Lucero gives a selection of examples of what could be considered as conceptual art's permissions. These 'modes' can be considered as playful, poetic and non-prescriptive strategies that art educators might use to establish a conceptual teaching/arts practice. To illustrate every mode, we use works by Lucero, (arts) teachers, artists and of projects students of the Amsterdam University of the Arts did with their pupils.

## Mode 1

# Consider the institution as material

Teachers can consistently and purposefully rethink what counts as material for making art and wonder how one's world can be made pliable. Pliability does not mean that the thing that is bended will necessarily change in the physical world, but rather will turn into an artwork because it was thought through a conceptual art filter. Through this mode, teachers can start rethinking how to make the school the material of what they are making. For instance, teachers who find themselves in a school - that might feel restrictive or repressive - can 'play' with the parameters and materiality of that situation (Lucero, 2016). Here teachers need not just think about the objects of the school. What is the special, philosophical, physical, and economic infrastructure of the school and how can those things become a teacher's 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 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.



*Strafwerk (Lines) - Johanna Biesewig (2018)*

Theatre teacher Johanna Biesewig developed an idea to hack the punishment system of a school. When pupils get a time out due to misbehavior, they are usually sent out of the classroom and have to report themselves elsewhere in the school to write lines or receive an other form of punishment. Biesewig intervenes this time out procedure, that is very common in many Dutch schools. Pupils who are sent out of the class report themselves to Johanna, who invites them to make a work during their timeout. Art production as reprimand? Or art production as an alternative for shame and punishment? 'Strafwerk' will be further implemented on a school in Amsterdam in 2018.

## Mode 2

# Attain energy via accumulation

One action, thought, breath or object is frequently ignored. However, their accumulation calls the world's attention. For teachers, who are often busy, the mode of accumulation is so favorable for it is making work from what they are already doing in the classroom, and it takes so little time: many things and activities in school are repeated daily, and can accumulate through the mere passage of time and form the basis for a collection. It can make the everyday art. The act of accumulation can come into existence with any object, thought or action but simply needs to begin at the number one of the collection.



*'Hacking the yearbook' - Dale Irby (1973-2013)*

The successive yearbooks of the Prestonwood Elementary School in Richardson, USA, suggest that teacher Dale Irby wore the same outfit every day, forty years long. The series started out as a 'happy accident', when Irby discovered that he had coincidentally worn the same outfit in the yearbook photo's of 1973 and 1974. Encouraged by his wife Cathy and his students, Irby continued to wear the same shirt and V-neck on the school pictures over four decades - even when they barely fitted anymore near his retirement in 2013. The accumulation of the pictures fascinates, because it reveals slow changes over time, like the aging of the human face, the trends in eyewear fashion and the subtle changes in the background picture. Another striking aspect of the project is that, through accumulation, the realization of this work took yearly less than two minutes of the maker's time.

## Mode 3

# Use closeness

Closeness allows for the intimacy of relationships to be transformed into art works. Closeness, however, does not always need to be about physical bodies but can also be understood as close relationships between people, objects, or spaces in school that hold the potential to elicit an artwork. Closeness does not always have to do with proximity or size. Sometimes closeness is driven by attitude and/or intention.



*This is our gang - Azaan, Zohab, Ali, Kevin, Nabil, Yassine & Anass (2018)*

Maarten Koole is an art teacher at the Over IJ College, a secondary school in Amsterdam. During this project, Koole allowed his students to decide completely for themselves what they wanted to make in the arts lessons. One group of students self-initiated a collective project entitled *This is our gang*, that included the production of masks, dances, pictures and films. 'Closeness' in this example, relates to the use of everyday popular culture as source for arts production. The online video game Fortnite was an important source for the students, who integrated movements and visual elements from the game with personal views, local influences and actualities. Only after Koole saw their collected final works, he realized how serious his students had taken their project. Just for the sake of the continuity in their photo's and films, they had worn the same clothes to school for several weeks.

## Mode 4

# Co-construct

To make, do and be art, teachers may need a partner to help them in the act of its construction. This partner might be another pupil; but it might also be an object, a location or situation in school. Someone or something to bring something to the table that you could never bring. Through the act of co-constructing teachers can be given parameters by their partner(s) that evoke the enactment of art, or teachers can give parameters that enable their partner(s) to make art.



*The Roof is on Fire - Suzanne Lacy, Annice Jacoby, and Chris Johnson (1993-1994)*

On June 9 in 1994, a large-scale event on a rooftop garage in Oakland was aired on national TV in the United States. What looked like evening news newscast was actually an art performance. Sitting in 100 parked cars, 220 public high school students had unscripted conversations on themes like their neighborhoods, drugs, family, conflicts with the police and education. Over 1000 local residents roamed from car to car to listen to the conversations, that were extensively documented on video by other students. Social artist Suzanne Lacy and her team wanted the teenagers to control both the medium and the message. The 1.5 hour performance was a response to a society in which teenagers are 'often talked about, but seldom listened to'. Lacy explains why a parking lot formed the ideal stage of the performance: "For generations, the automobile has been a symbol of teenage independence and a rite of passage into adult life. The car illustrates the transient quality of this stage of teens' lives. It is a teenage living room, a sanctuary for speaking your mind." The performance formed the finale of a two-year trajectory that included the implementation of a media literacy curriculum on teen identity and politics on a local high school, a teacher training program in which local teachers developed media literacy lesson plans, and the training of a group of students in all aspects of the production and media coverage of the performance. In *The Roof is on Fire*, Lacy and her team position themselves as co-creating teacher-artists, handing more and more responsibility to their participants along the way.

## Mode 5

# Embrace invisibility

The teacher who works as a conceptual artist frequently thinks and acts through dematerialized, time-based, and relational modes. As a result, some works will never be materialized, documented or recognized as such by others. Or, as Lucero (2016, p. 193/194) notes: "dematerialized, conceptual gestures can sometimes be completely undetectable". Some works might thus only exist in a teacher's mind, fade away into memory, time, or material.

**Jorge R. Lucero**  
(Mexican-American, born 1976)

***Split My Lunch***  
(2011)

Materials vary.

Within *Office as Artwork* Lucero will be holding a series of participatory events that are open to members of the general public. Every Tuesday, from 12:15 pm to 1:00 pm Lucero invites one member of the public to split his lunch with him. The lunch will be provided in equal parts to the portion that Lucero is consuming and only require that the participating guest provide conversation. If you are reading this sign you are eligible. Here's how it works: Every Tuesday morning Lucero will place a small note with a password in his mail slot. Whoever claims that note on that particular Tuesday will be welcomed to split Lucero's lunch. The participant must then show up for the lunch no later than 12:20pm on that Tuesday. Missing the appointment causes the guest to forfeit the lunch, which Lucero will then consume wholly by himself. Although special care will be taken to describe the contents of every lunch, controversial and/or harmful ingredients can't always be avoided, therefore participants are under no obligation to eat any part of their half of the lunch that they find objectionable.

*Split My Lunch - Jorge Lucero (2011)*

In 2011, associate professor Jorge Lucero opened his office at the School of Art + Design at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign for a project titled *Split My Lunch*. Every Tuesday during the lunch break, Lucero welcomed students and other members of the school community to share a one-on-one meal with him. The simple gesture of sharing food together in an office playfully disrupts the unwritten rules and codes of behavior of the school environment. Because *Split My Lunch* is unrelated to formal school procedures such as counseling, assessment or supervision, traditional hierarchic relations between participants are temporarily removed. This offers participants opportunities to get to know each other in an informal manner. The intimacy of the performative meeting is further enhanced by the detail that Lucero shares a home made meal with his visitor. Lucero commented: "I have also met students who were not my students. I have provided impromptu career and academic counseling, philosophical conversation, artistic critique, and frequently mere informal conversation. Most importantly, by opening the doors of my office through these everyday gestures (...) I am foregrounding the idea that school is life, not just a preparation for it" (Lucero, 2018). Lucero documented only the conditions of *Split My Lunch*, the content of the different lunch sessions remains something between the participants only.

## Mode 6

# Present narratives

To present narratives, teachers can hyper-document everything, write about it, produce images, books, exhibitions, websites, social media posts or they can merely tell the story of what they've done to someone else. There are countless ways to present a narrative, to present art.

*Privacy - Class of senior highschool students of the Rietveld Lyceum, Doetinchem (2013)*

Art teacher Jacques Blommestijn has experimented frequently with large scale group exhibitions of his exam classes at different locations outside his school. Blommestijn supervises the artistic process regarding the presentations, but he challenges his students to develop the central concept that ties all their individual works together. In 2013, Blommestijn found an old local Mosque, that his class could partly use as a temporary exhibition space. The room that appealed most to his students was a space without windows that was used to place the dead to lie in state. A creepy space. The only constraints that their teacher gave them for the exhibition were that they should come up with something that everyone should be very excited about, and that it would result in an article in the local newspaper. Triggered by the location, and inspired by movies and the work of Edward Kienholz, the class agreed on a central theme that was very actual for them at that time: online privacy. Their idea was to 'stalk' the journalist of the local paper via Facebook, and decorate the whole interior of the 'corpse room' with her private family pictures. Visitors of the exhibition would have to go through endless legal paperwork, before they would be allowed to see the room with the pictures. Other students formed the Rietveld Support Team for possible victims of stalking. Fearing an upcoming commotion, Blommestijn contacted the journalist a few weeks before the opening, and told her what his students were up to. She was not amused and wanted her pictures to be removed. Although the students had not broken any legal rules, Blommestijn asked them to respect the journalist's privacy. After their initial disappointment, the class came up with a subtle solution: they 'remixed' the name of the journalist in such a way that it appeared to be a man, and replaced all of the original pictures by resembling pictures they found online. Additionally, visitors of the exhibition would hear a re-enacted telephone conversation the students had had with the journalist, now played by a male student. When the journalist visited the opening of the exhibition, the students gave her a tour with detailed instructions of how to secure her Facebook account. Finally, another journalist wrote an article about the project. The exhibition ended, this story remains.



## Implications

Through playing with these modes, the school with its systems, relationships, schedules and obligations can be redefined as 'artistic material'. This opens up possibilities for teachers to engage in a practice in which educational and artistic goals can be pursued at the same time. It can free newly graduated arts teachers of the thought that a profession as educator is automatically at the expense of the role as artist (Hall, 2010). Furthermore, this approach can help more experienced teachers who feel that their artist/performer identity is more and more absorbed in their teacher role (Imms & Ruanglertbutr, 2013). As perceptions about the arts teacher' identity in part are formed during their teacher training college (Vella, 2016), *Teacher as conceptual artist* also raises important issues for the education of arts educators. First, it emphasizes that a conceptual art approach, in which art production is idea-driven rather than object-driven, opens up opportunities to include immaterial forms in an artistic practice, including pedagogy and education (Lucero, 2013). Secondly, *Teacher as conceptual artist* proposes an alternative for the traditional artist/teacher model, by integrating both practices, rather than locating the artistic practice outside the school and the pedagogical practice inside the school. We believe that modes of operation to integrate artistic and pedagogical practice, inspired by developments in conceptual art and social practice, are under-recognized in the field of arts education, and could be further explored and utilized in teacher training programmes.

The research project *Teacher as conceptual artist* was 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. The impact of the project on the identity of these students is researched by Emiel Heijnen, Melissa Bremmer and Sanne Kersten and will be published in 2019.

## Literature

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## Notes

- 1 Parts of this publication have been published earlier in Lucero, J. (2018). *Teacher as conceptual artist*. Amsterdam, NL: Lectoraat Kunsteducatie, Amsterdamse Hogeschool voor de kunsten. <https://www.ahk.nl/onderzoek/publicaties/publicatie/teacher-as-conceptual-artist/>
- 2 Conceptual art is narrowly defined as a concretized art form that is predicated on ideas