

Panel *Learning from the Future*

Pablo Helguera— Moderator

I am thankful to Shuddha and SITAC for the invitation and for giving pedagogy a space within the context of this conference.

The word “education” is inextricably linked to the future: we usually refer to it as the key for attaining a just, free and democratic society. At the same time, political campaign discourse appropriates education in the form of clichés such as “building a better future through knowledge”. That is where the problem begins, when education is relegated to rhetoric of the future, existing in a permanent limbo of not being what it hopes to become and not yet existing in the present other than as a promise. While having aspirations is certainly necessary, what is least desirable is to exist in that nebulous state of waiting for Godot.

In this panel, we will talk about those pauses and suspensions, in that space between present and future, of those hopeful moments that generate that educational push and desire for action, toward the future and in response to the past.

In this particular field, the lens of the 1960s still influences us. In Mexico, the writer from that generation who may have best expressed that instant of suspension that I am referring to was Salvador Elizondo, who in his novel *Farabeuf o la crónica de un instante*, writes:

We are a premonition; the image that takes shape in someone's mind way before the events through which we participate in his life take place; a fortuitous encounter that has not yet occurred, which is still gestating in the crevices of time; a future event yet to be consummated. We are an incomprehensible sign traced on a fogged-up window during a rainy evening. We are the almost lost memory of a remote incident.”

With the aim of breaking that eternal state of suspension, we need pedagogy, but not just as a utopian impulse, as the inspiration of a possible but ungraspable future, but as a project that occurs in the present through concrete and definitive actions, which are, at the same time, the best guarantee of the realization of that scenario that we see in the future.

In 2008, in the United States, the populist rhetoric of Barack Obama that fascinated the world clung to the term “hope”, and it is interesting to reflect, in the perspective of only three years, on the vast differences between that social project rooted

in hope and the one now expressed at a global level by Occupy Wall Street, nihilist at times and propositive at others. Whatever way we look at it, our relationship with “hope” is much more problematic now; it produces skepticism, disappointment and an urgency to see changes with immediate effects—a spirit that is most strongly felt during global election years as is the case of 2012 here in Mexico, the U.S., France, Russia, Germany and many other countries.

At a particular moment, the empty promises of change and transformation amidst economic and social instability reach a limit and cause a break. This happened with the event that has defined our present, the Arab Spring, an episode that has made us reexamine or reaffirm what we understand as possibility, cyber-activism and self-organizing, and in other ways, artistic activity itself and its relationship with pedagogy.

In the art world, these historical events increase the urgency to resolve a series of debates going on for a few years about what pertains to socially committed art, sometimes referred to as relational art or social practice. The debate in question revolves around the issue of the value of using these practices in the sphere of activism or social change. For lack of time, I can’t adequately describe these debates here; I will only mention that critics like Claire Bishop, Grant Kester, Shannon Jackson and artists like Liam Gillick have articulated diverse positions regarding the form in which these practices concede, or reinforce, the artistic realm and how they seek to act within the social sphere.

The art that comes as a response from the relational art of the 90s seeks, I would suggest, a kind of interaction that is not exclusively determined by the art space, art audience or even the artistic discourse, sometimes with the desire of breaking with the decade of biennialization and global market that preceded it.

In this scheme, pedagogy has held, and continues to occupy, a central place in the debate. Pedagogy is not only central in the construction of a discursive community but is also inherently a form of social interaction in which experience is not the end but the means, offering a kind of exchange, at least in theory, more ambitious and long-lasting than the spontaneous or playful interaction that may occur within a gallery. References to the pedagogical urge or, if you like, the “pedagogical turn” not only respond to relational art but also refer to artists like Alan Kaprow and Joseph Beuys, for whom art and education are fused, and in the case of Beuys, activism.

Going back to the debate I was referring to, the question that emerges is: what kind of pedagogical models does art-education offer in the future? How should we interpret them, as pedagogical poetics or as possible plans for activist initiatives? The answers to these questions have important implications in the way we should develop a critical language around these practices, but especially in how art and its pedagogical angle position themselves at a social and political time.

In the case of Mexico, it is probably necessary to reflect on our nation's many pedagogical adventures, some yet unresolved, some already mentioned in this conference, as well as their intersection (or absence thereof) with art making. Undoubtedly, a main character in this story is José Vasconcelos, who best represents our contradictions between cultural futurism and concrete activist action. The Vasconcelista legacy continues to be a complex theoretical knot that we have yet to unravel, as we do the fact that we still repeat the mantra "Por mi raza hablará el espíritu" (The spirit shall speak for my people)¹, without really knowing what such a statement implies today. Another example of the cultural and pedagogical legacy still to be resolved lies in the Zapatismo movement, whose proposals continue to float around as specters of the political discourse of the left. Added to that is the suspendedness we are experiencing today, the fight against violence by artists and writers led by Javier Sicilia to influence and find a path toward problem resolution.

But the problem for this panel is not described exclusively in terms of Mexico but of art globally: how should the pedagogical thrust, with its inherent futurism and hopefulness, position itself theoretically and practically in relation to today's events? What implications are in sacrificing the autonomous territory of art for activism, or rather, where do we place an art that doesn't want to be art but pedagogy or activism? Or, in contrast, how can we validate a merely reflective or symbolic practice inside an art world that mainly depends on 1%? And finally, what do these new practices say about the future? How do they build it, how do they predict it, how do they help us to prevent to become something more than permanent suspension awaiting an uncertain future, a failed possibility, or as Elizondo said, an almost lost memory of a remote incident?

Joining me on this panel are Irit Rogoff and Molly Nesbit. I won't repeat the illustrious biographies which you have in your programs, but I would just like to emphasize the crucial role both have played in framing debates around some of these issues, as speakers dealing with many artists and curators: Molly as co-instigator of seminal projects like *Utopia Station*, and Irit as a key voice in debates around the pedagogical shift in art. I am grateful for their presence and without further ado give them the floor, so that we can launch into some joint dialogue afterwards.

Irit Rogoff—

2 countries
 2 protests
 2 tent universities
 2 questions
 No answers.

August: the tent occupation of the Movement for Social Justice in Tel Aviv. The movement had started with a host of inconformities over standards of living: wages, mortgages, real estate prices, food prices, etc. It was a response to the accelerated speed of capitalization of what had until recently been a welfare state. The deeper issues of the state: the occupation of Palestine, the extreme military presence in every facet of civil life, the foundational injustice of the premise of the Jewish state seemed invisible in what was trying to be a popular movement about so called social justice. And then...a tent popped up on Rothschild Boulevard called “1948” and after that one called the “Nakhba” and then another and then another, and in these tents, a self-education project about the foundation of the state was unravelling.

In a seminar in the 1948 tent, one participant says: “You’ve written a book about active processes of un-belonging; can these, whatever they are, work to dismantle the occupation?” I am silent.

November: the Bank of Ideas, part of the London Occupy movement. A seminar in a disused office of a financial company in the City, the financial center of London and, in my eyes, of Europe. The participants talk about “agency” and “empowerment”, and they want to know if the terms that I have turned up with: “potentiality” and “singularization” are as effective. “How exactly,” they ask, “do these terms affect the balance of power as we experience it ?” I am silent.

This silence has not so much to do with a loss of words as with being confronted by a dilemma concerning the relation of critical terminology within the very exciting moment of taking action, or seeming to take action. The excitement of “action” in the case of so many of the political revolutionary movements in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen (I am not speaking of Libya and Syria, as those seem to me to be more civil wars than protest movements) and of the social justice movements in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Israel and of the alter capitalist ‘Occupy’ movement in the U.S., Canada, Britain, Italy and elsewhere. The excitement seems to be that these are not just protest movements, but they are actually an effort to challenge and change the terminology which dominates political discourse. And such a challenge involves a huge project of self-education, of contesting the very knowledge base which we know, of elaborating a self-generated pedagogy that privileges questions of what we need to know right now and of how we need to know it, and whether this knowledge we so desperately need is analytical knowledge about the crisis: how it’s come about, who are its victims and who are its beneficiaries, what needs to be reformed, who needs to be made accountable...

Or is there a mode of “crisis thinking” that is emerging, that is not descriptive and reactive but generative, in particular around the “economy of crisis” and the “education of crisis” and at the intersection of critical economy, art, anthropology and

radical pedagogy. Instead of discussing the crisis itself, these become ways of framing and reframing critical issues —such as the one of insider and outsider or individuals and collectivities, or legitimacies and illegitimacies— through a performative process of cultural production. In particular “crisis thinking” looks at the idea of political contingency:

What can we salvage in the debris of the crisis? Can we open new temporalities out of the here and now? In what ways have concepts of “potentiality” and “actualization” replaced older notions of “agency” and “empowerment”? Can short-term and informal economies and regimes of labor emerge from the financial and intellectual wasteland that surrounds us?

The centrality of self-education platforms around the globe and as part of all of these protest movements has, in effect, produced one of these junctures that have been so difficult to predict or characterize. I have been part of the so-called “educational turn in art” for some eight years now, through a series of exhibitions I curated and co-curated, a series of public forums and publications, but mostly through trying to theorize what I thought the implications of this educational turn were beyond a trope that privileged gatherings and conversations and self-generating seminars and reading groups as a form of artistic and cultural practice. One of the most interesting aspects of this “turn” has been the movement of ideas and critical thinking from the university out into the cultural sphere of the expanded field of art and the inventions of new platforms and new modes of dissemination for those ideas: self-authorized night schools and free academies and reading groups and “think tanks” have recognized that we need to pose questions from many different places, that posed from elsewhere the questions acquire a freedom they might not have had, that infiltrating institutions dedicated to one practice —display or art—with a series of active questions changes that institution dramatically, and that we can’t have one model of knowledge that fits all of our needs. These platforms have been innovative and imaginative and have focused on questions rather than answers, on processes rather than products. When my collaborator Florian Schneider and members of his media activist group asked, “What does it mean to own an image?” (Image) they do far more than investigate the market and the ever-rising value of objects through systems of valorization. In thinking that it is not only the dealer who sold the piece, the museum that bought it, the curator who will catalogue, register and display it, but also the restorer who conserved it, the truckdriver who transported it, the student who studied it as part of his/her Ph.D. dissertation, the writer who published a book about political banners and posters —all of these have an investment, partly capital, partly cultural, partly psychic and driven by desire and possession—, the notion of ownership is actually redefined.

Put very briefly, as I look at the images that have come from Tahrir Square and Rothschild Boulevard, from Bank of Ideas and the Tent University, it would seem that this movement of ideas has continued from the research university, where some of them have been conceptualized, to the art world, where innovative new platforms have produced new accesses and audiences to the realm of political protest, where people have insisted that to change conditions is to acquire new knowledge bases.

We are speaking here today under the aegis of “Learning from the Future”, and I am not sure about the future. I seem to struggle with the present at every turn or because I think the future is always, already there. Gilles Deleuze famously said, “Every once in a while, the future rushes through the present like a gust of wind that disappears and leaves everything slightly disturbed within the stillness.”

I was listening to Keith Moxey speak about contemporaneity yesterday and thought that for me contemporaneity is never harnessed to history, but it is rather a moment of interpellation, of being hailed by a problem set or an urgency and of locating yourself within it —like Althusser’s famous argument in his essay on ideological state apparatus. But unlike Althusser’s location of interpellation as a form of internalized disciplining authority, this form of interpellation, this notion of interpellation, is the moment in which we make a problem our own. We are the problem, and it inhabits us and we produce the terminology with which to see it anew. So self-education is not acting in a contemporary mode but is an instantiation of contemporaneity.

Jean Luc Nancy proceeds to take on the proper names of collectivity “we” and “us” and their relation to meaning, and he does so obviously against the grain of the claims of identity and their ability to separate and to segregate. He takes up the notion of meaning precisely because of this proliferation that has no other meaning than the indeterminate multiplication of centripetal meanings, meanings closed in on themselves and supersaturated with significance, that are no longer meaningful because they refer to their own closure, to their horizon of appropriation and have to spread nothing but destruction, hatred and the denial of existence (page xiii). To these ends, he has to go back to both “we” and “meaning” as the building blocks of another form of relatedness that is not founded on the articulation of identity.

We do not “have” meaning any more, because we ourselves are meaning —entirely, without reserve, infinitely, with no more meaning other than “us”. (page 1). . . . Being itself is given to us as meaning, being does not have meaning. “Being itself”, the phenomenon of “being” is meaning that is in turn its own circulation - and we are this circulation. (page 3)

There is no meaning then if meaning is not shared, and not because there would be an ultimate or first signification that all beings have in common, but because meaning is itself the sharing of being. (page 2)

Thinking back to the silence of those two moments, in those two tents earlier this year. I begin to understand that this was not a learning and teaching situation; it was one of witnessing. What I have been observing is the constitution of “the coming public”, in the demise of the classical bourgeois public sphere, the demise of civil society public institution under neo-liberal governance. The increasing privatization of both urban spaces and education sites is constituting itself in the ebbs and flows of what Nancy calls “being in common”, and the political potential of this mode has only begun to be explored.

Molly Nesbit— Pre-Occupations Portage at the Ford

Shuddha Sengupta called last fall about the future, which is not so different from calling about utopia. It was not so different from the call that came ten years ago from a Swiss friend of mine. Utopia, like the future, keeps coming up because it runs away. To chase it is to dream it; there are no direct paths. It seems to run in streams. We run alongside them; we rest on their banks. An imagery of riversides has nourished us. We are the tigers.

None of this can be addressed as a purely general or abstract matter. The projects we now will discuss are small in scale, and if larger, mindful of their local base and point. It seems most important to be specific, particular and to ask just what special effects and consequences we can note? What will we build? Those who have gone before have left behind their experience for us to use. They have left their messages, their art, their books.

My main question is this: how do books help us move forward, live forward?

In general, the most helpful ones do not come forward as prophecies or monologues. They come when one writer invites another writer into his sentences to help finish them.

For example: In the late spring of 1979, Roland Barthes had difficulty finding an end for the book he was calling *Camera Lucida*. Its subject, nominally, was photography. The manuscripts show Barthes changing certain elements right up to the point when the last draft had to be sent off, irrevocably, to the printer. He had labored over the *punctum*. He had stalled at the end. Late in the game he had thought of a finish that would let his own thought just break off short, as if it had snapped. He would

then have handed over the last words to Marpa, a Tibetan sage of the 11th century, a man known for bringing the Buddhist teachings from India north:

Marpa was shaken when his son was killed, and one of his disciples said: “You have always told us that everything is illusion. And so, with the death of your son, is it not an illusion?” And Marpa replied, “Certainly, but the death of my son is a super-illusion.”²

In the end, Marpa’s remark would be cut free from the book and floated onto the back cover, uncommented, as if it too were an image or a cherry blossom branch. The last paragraphs of *Camera Lucida* show Barthes writing on alone, wrestling with the edges of reality and the kinds of form that can touch them. Form aspires, but can only aspire, he thought, to the condition of light. He was left alone with his questions. Was the photograph to be subjected to the civilizing force of the perfect illusion? Or would the photograph be allowed to rouse the dormant mind to open its eyes to see, now, verily, the intractable reality?

For another example:

A few years later, a quotation from Racine hung onscreen briefly as Chris Marker’s new film, *Sans Soleil*, began.

L'éloignement des pays répare en quelque sorte la trop grande proximité des temps. [The distance between countries compensates somewhat for the excessive closeness of time.]

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But in the English version, a stanza from the poem “Ash Wednesday” by T. S. Eliot took its place.

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place.³

Then an image of three little girls walking through fields on a cold bright day appeared. They walked uphill. A woman’s voice began reading, elegantly, from a letter:

The first image he told me about was of three children on a road in Iceland, in 1965. He said that for him it was the image of happiness and also that he had tried several times to link it to other images, but it never worked. He wrote me: one day I’ll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader; if they don’t see happiness in the picture, at least they’ll see the black.

Words made to stand apart, recounted, as they are in *Sans Soleil*, and in the *Camera Lucida*, words suspended, live differently. In these two cases, nothing is passed, only lit for an instant. Super-illusions cannot have form or fire or sound in the usual sense of those words. They glide away, staring back. Night falls quickly over them.

For a third example: Jacques Rancière wrote the *Nights of the Proletariat*, a long book, at the same time that Marker sat sunless and Barthes put the pen toward his camera lucida. *Nights of the Proletariat* was published in 1981. Rancière chose to open his account at the Gates of Hell in the year 1841.⁴ The lives of French Utopians, laborers by day and visionary political men and women by night, are documented individually as well as collectively as they head toward the great testing ground of 1848. Rancière took care not to speak for them but to transport the real complexity of their thoughts and dreams forward. Dare one breathe the name of Scheherezade? Their nights become tales told by a philosopher. As Rancière set out his account of the Saint-Simonian vision in the early 1830s, "It is in the moments when the real world wavers and seems to reel into mere appearance, more than in the slow accumulation of day-to-day experiences, that it becomes possible to form a judgment about the world."⁵

The many utopian efforts to make judgments and give them political form would rely upon the existing conditions of metaphysics but not mimic them. One worker, a joiner, wrote to another, a ragpicker:

Plunge into terrible readings. That will awaken passions in your wretched existence, and the laborer needs them to stand tall in the face of that which is ready to devour him. So from the *Imitation to Lélia*, explore the enigma of the mysterious and formidable chagrin at work in those with sublime concepts.⁶

Rancière follows their explorations. They never did speak or write with one voice. Raqs Media Collective carried this kind of dream off into the color blue last year when they made their *Strikes at Time*. There are many ways to read a book and bring it with you. Knowledge does not always appear as a quotation. It can be completely present and active when it is sublimely *absorbed*.

My three French examples took their place in the decade after May 1968, when education itself was unmasked repeatedly as ideological process, and organized knowledge itself was receiving an onslaught of reform and critique. But education is really nothing more or less than the signaling of the books that should make it through to the future, whether through school or after school, it doesn't matter.

Education involves the passage of wisdom as well as certified training. Education is the stream alongside which books are passed from hand to hand, books written by someone else, recommended, tested books. It is like the dynamic that

Godard began to sketch in the months before the Black September of 1970 in Jordan, where Palestinian guerillas discuss how to keep crossing a river without being killed (they were killed). Afterward, the intervening river, the quick flow of current, became a structural image for Godard, a way of asking all the hard questions about communication, interruption, contact, discussion. Even with contact, there was no guarantee of parity, or understanding. No crossing. And Gilles Deleuze, when he picked up this problem of the ET, took it forward, first on the pages of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* and then, with Félix Guattari as they opened their *Mille Plateaus*. All this happened over 30 years ago. But hadn't Godard picked up the ET from Sartre, who had picked it up from *The Sound and the Fury*, a book by William Faulkner?

When my Swiss friend, Hans Ulrich Obrist called about utopia, we ended up with a project done with Rirkrit Tiravanija called *Utopia Station*. When it took shape as an exhibition space in Venice, it offered a platform, like a *quai*, and a garden through which people, posters, art, conversations about the present and the future streamed. Leif Elgren and Michael Van Hausswolf came and pulped *Utopia* to make fresh sheets of paper for a new day. Someone else came along and hung the un pulped pages on their drying line, long after they had gone. Edouard Glissant came and spoke. Yoko Ono set up a wish tree.

We can never take all the books with us. We must choose to leave some behind, just as we choose to take some with us. The many collective art projects of the last ten years have done as much. But so have the larger forums and movements, which have made every effort to keep the small-scale hand-off books going. Art, too, enters the rhythm of transfer and hand-off there, sometimes invisibly, for example in the Joseph Beuys Corridor, the Nasreen Mohammedi Lobby and the Ana Mendieta Fabrik.

The new social movements of the 21st century, be they the small collectives or the World Social Forums or the Occupiers spawned by Occupy Wall Street, now have made books organize and open discussions; have asked writers and intellectuals to speak up; have made floating libraries an important part of their landscape, and have given both intellectuals and artists a channel to use.

Even *Time* magazine has been obliged to acknowledge the presence of books in the issue that named the Protester "Person of the Year" 2011.

Time, nostalgic for Marx and Engels' *Manifesto*, seems to suggest a center or a static exhibition where there is not one. It can't reduce the movement of minds to a list; it can't summarize the shifting images of possible other worlds, the dreams that are visions, not mirages. It leaves out Hakim Bey and Gene Sharp and any number of books that have actually mattered to those living the Arab Spring and those who rally around the Occupiers. It probably leaves out books that matter to you.

How do the books travel from Pre-Occupation to Pre-Occupation downstream to the future? Which ones would you take? Which ones would you give? This is the real site of theory now. Thinking is moving between people. It does not matter if there is or is not a school so long as *the thinking* is being *tested* inside and outside. So long as it is strong.

Take this room, for example. What book would you suggest that I take from you now? What would our library today, here in this room be? And why these things and not others? These are questions we can answer, and with which we can clear a short path, a tractable reality. Such paths are the ones that enable something, if not us, to survive time.

At least for a while. A book could carry a wish, like the cards Yoko Ono made for Occupy Wall Street to use. With the idea that trees will multiply to hold them, and wishes grow.

Hugo Hopping— Nothing Human Is Alien to Me*

In early September 1981, Ingmar Bergman invited a hired cast of actors to lunch in order to have them meet prior to the filming of *Fanny and Alexander* (1982). While there is nothing unusual about a director wanting to bring together his forces before battle, Bergman thought it novel and curious to film this meeting. Whether he had a peculiar agenda for filming this meeting or not, a miscellaneous record was caught on film, and the director rolled the camera on this moment. From the outset, we see everyone at ease—fresh and gleaming—with the expectation of the enterprise lying ahead. Dressed in typical Scandinavian fashion, full of bright but washed pastels, the actors relax, coying up to one another. Every time the camera of this pre-production document gazes straight into an actor, silent smiles emerge along with the civil intimacy of colleagues. In short, we see a ready-made community forever integrated on celluloid and bent optimistically on the near future to come.

We can argue that while actors are more or less familiar with one another in the field, the sensation you gather from looking at the film is one of heightened social excitement, similar to those rendered in Renoir's impressions. The 30 years between now and the making of this document attest to the biological and social time that has passed, and while things might seem "dated", the promising (and simultaneously, the retrospective) success of *Fanny and Alexander* ignites this first meeting. Not only as an example of life but as confirmation of an accounted future that materialized. So tempting it is to have material of this kind that Ingmar Bergman eventually includes this footage to preface his behind-the-scenes film *Dokument Fanny och Alexander — The Making of "Fanny and Alexander"* (1986). The inter-title statement introducing the documentary