WAYS OF BEING: CONCEPTUAL ART MODES-OF-OPERATION
FOR PEDAGOGY AS CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE

A Dissertation in
Art Education

by
Jorge R. Lucero

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The dissertation of Jorge R. Lucero was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Charles R. Garoian  
Professor of Art Education  
Dissertation Adviser  
Chair of Committee

Yvonne Gaudelius  
Professor of Art Education &  
Women’s Studies

Irina Aristarkhova  
Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies & Art

Madhu Prakash  
Professor of Education,  
Educational Theory and Policy

Karen Keifer-Boyd  
Professor of Art Education  
Affiliate Professor of Women’s Studies  
Art Education Graduate Program Coordinator

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.
Abstract

How can a pedagogical and creative practice coexist? Where are the interstices of these two practices that highlight both of their potentialities? How do pedagogy and contemporary art practices challenge and reflect each other to generate new ways of working? Is there a moment when pedagogy and art practice are the same thing? What type of agency can this pedagogy-art confluence create for a learner? This dissertation was conceptualized as a written artwork to make proposals around these topics. The author, coming from a studio art background and having taught at both the high school and college level proposes strategies for examining conceptual art in order to discover “ways of being”, which can merge the efforts of pedagogues and artists more readily.

Examining how conceptual art affronts the entrenched labor-equals-rigor models of Western art, the author points to how these subversive modes of operation expand curricular practice. Conceptual art modes such as durational art, relational aesthetics, *bricolage*, and civic engagement art are placed alongside the non-linear concept of *currere* (Pinar and Grumet, 1976), or “living curriculum” in order to reconfigure pedagogy as contemporary art practice. Latin American conceptualism is examined as a mode that demarcates a local, hybridized pedagogy as conceptualist practice. Among others, the 1920’s work of *Los Estridentistas* and the contemporary conceptualism of Uruguayan artist Luis Camnitzer is examined. The dissertation also catalogues the author’s personal practice through pedagogy as contemporary art practice. Classroom and gallery projects are examined. The author’s collaboration with the Chicago performance group Goat Island, his research into the pedagogy of experimental composer John Cage, and one of the author’s own autoethnographic performance texts (Denzin, 2003) are
included in this dissertation. An analysis of these modes of working is proposed, offering that a pedagogical practice imbricated with a conceptual art practice permits for a more emancipatory pedagogical and creative enterprise. The dissertation ends with evidence of the author’s critical discoveries as a first generation Mexican-American navigating the complexities of class, privilege, and race in American schooling—through art education—attaining agency and a more sentient presence in the world.
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“The organism is a force, not a transparency” (Dewey, 1934, p. 246).

or

“We still don’t know how much less ‘nothing’ can be” (Lippard and Chandler, 1968/1999, p. 50).
Introduction
A personal task

What I wanted the most at age fourteen, at the beginning of high school, was to be on the school’s football team. To play Illinois high school football, a young man must maintain a certain academic standing. Perennially a “C/D” student, it was the consistent good grades I received in my art courses that kept me academically eligible to play football. Ironically, it was only in those art classes that grades were irrelevant to me.

My disinterest in what grade I was getting in art didn’t come from my affinity for the subject, rather from a deep-seeded—however inarticulate—feeling that grades in school were a type of payment for labor and that what I was doing in art class was not—in fact—laborious in any conventional sense. The economic exchange of grades for schoolwork simply did not calculate for me in art and—honestly—thinking about art processes as work at that time of my life seemed ridiculous. Sure the classes were fun, I even remember having moments of in-the-zone “flow” (Csikszentmihaly, 1990) and moments that could be identified by proponents of the theory of multiple intelligences as quintessential markers of my spatial and bodily-kinesthetic abilities; but the real reason why I excelled at art in high school—a reason I could have explained, even at age fourteen—was that I cared. I cared about what I was doing. In other words, in art the task at hand was my task, a personal task, whose results affected me in a direct and profound way.

Faking it

During the first two years of high school, drawing and constructing out of clay felt a lot like playing football. On the field and in the studio I had conjured up a
misconception that these two activities didn’t require me to think. Contrary to everything else in school, making art and playing football were freeing activities. This idea that “thinking was not required” to play football turns out to produce quite a stagnated football player. It is only now, some twenty years later, that I realize that football—although notoriously physical—is an intricately cerebral game, where every player needs to execute his role perfectly, have a keen space consciousness, memorize and synthesize complicated configurations of information, as well as be ready to improvise at lightning quick speed. For a kid like me, who thought that football was all about brute strength and reflexes, the intelligence required to play the game—even at the high school level—became an excruciating reality recognized first by my body and only much later by my mind. As this reality became more concrete to my teammates who understood that good football players required a high level of intelligence and consciousness, they began to get more playing time and I partook in the age-old American high school pastime of “warming the bench”.

Art’s intelligence-requirement could be worked around more easily than football’s. Although now I realize that art is first and foremost an intellectual practice, in high school I found that yielding to this false (and appealing) notion of “not having to think” while making art was easier to maintain and get away with in art class than it was in playing football. On the football field, if I acted like I knew what I was doing but didn’t, a better-prepared player would expose that and my entire team would suffer the consequences. In the art studio, the mistakes that I made from “not knowing” or from pretending that I knew and then “just doing” were always evaluated with an optimistic attitude, only occasionally corrected, and most importantly, accepted—not as accidents or
failures—but as serendipitous findings and knowledge creation. In art making, I could always fake intelligence until intelligence emerged.

“Thank you punk rock”

After two years of playing high school football I quit the team. I latched onto my art classes since at that point they were the only remaining enjoyment I had in my secondary schooling experience. When my counselor tried to get me to sign up for DAVEA, a program at the nearby community college that allowed underperforming high school students to leave the building after half a day in order to receive technical training (e.g. automotive repair, culinary arts, medical technician skills), I refused and convinced her to let me take the remainder of my coursework in the art department. By my senior year in high school, I was taking three required academic courses and four art classes. I’d show up for school at seven thirty in the morning and by eleven I was in the studio. I would remain in the art studio until the last faculty member left for the day. In any conventionally technical sense of the word, I was a bad artist, but I was prolific.

At the same time I began a friendship with a co-worker at the local K-Mart who had graduated from my high school and was now attending the prestigious School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). Although only a few years older than me, Alberto Aguilar was a serious painter, someone who seemed to eat, sleep, and breathe art. When Alberto and I were scheduled to work together at K-Mart, we would find a way to wax philosophical about art and other seemingly serious topics. Alberto would bring books from SAIC’s library containing examples of some of the greatest, most titillating Modernist painting I had ever been exposed to (Picasso, Braque, Gris, Matisse, Balthus,
De Chirico, Magritte, Rivera, Manet, and Cezanne) and we would consume those images attempting to figure out what those guys were doing and how we could mimic them in our paintings. Alberto and I became inseparable, a self-imagined suburban art movement.

At the beginning of our burgeoning friendship, both Alberto and I had just come out of long-term high school relationships and we found solace in—not only our friendship—but also in what we perceived to be our artist’s calling. Taking ourselves this seriously and romanticizing our art activities in this way intensified our focus and precocious determination; but more importantly, it became a means—again—to fake intelligence until intelligence emerged. It was a way, as I later heard the performance group Goat Island put it, of “discover[ing] a performance by making it” (www.goatislandperformance.org). We behaved as if we were art conscious and over time we actually became more art conscious. Our united front was not unlike the efforts put forth by suburban kids that formed punk rock bands in their parent’s basements and garages. On many levels we didn’t know what we were getting ourselves into—we didn’t know the rules of what it meant to make art or be an artist—but we knew that we didn’t have any alternative and that we needed to ride the wave as long as the wave would sustain us.

This wave, much like the DIY (do-it-yourself) punk rock wave that swept suburbs from D.C. to L.A. in the early eighties (see Azerrad, 2001), came from a certain degree of suburban middle-class security, a drive towards taking ownership of our own education (mostly outside of school), and a need to produce artworks regardless of our product’s marketability. Only knowing a little bit about how to be or become an artist, Alberto and I hunkered down and constantly made stuff, taking our cue primarily from Matisse and
Picasso’s prolific—albeit heavily romanticized—legend. Even then, we suspected that there was something skewed about early Modernism’s Eurocentric, chauvinistic, genius-artist paradigm, but what we admired the most about Modernism was the work ethic. We painted and drew every chance we got and we looked at a ton of stuff. We became overly confident in our ability to look at paintings and eventually to talk about them. Even though we had many teachers, it was through this incessant making and talking that we taught ourselves. We became artist via immersion.

**Teaching as contemporary art practice, beginning sparks**

There were a number of years when Alberto and I were at SAIC together, eventually sharing a studio. At SAIC we took a beating. Not a physical beating, although I’m sure our years there took a physical toll, but an intellectual, ego, spiritual, and philosophical beating. After college we remained great friends, collaborating on everything from team teaching, exhibiting, curating, and publishing.

Now some eighteen years after Alberto and I began working together at K-Mart, we find ourselves in very similar personal and artistic conditions. The latest incarnation of our collaboration coming in the form of a co-curated exhibit of participatory art events at Chicago’s Cobalt Studio (see chapter four). We are both college teachers, we are both dedicated to our families (each of us being married with four children, eight total), and we both only make paintings when it is relevant to a more conceptual project. Currently it is difficult for Alberto and I to designate our artistic practice with a specific, readily-understandable category (e.g. performance art, painting, or curating), so we usually just identify ourselves by our professional teaching affiliations: Alberto teaches at Harold
Washington College in downtown Chicago and I teach at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign (a two and a half hour drive from each other). These professional affiliations and our ready identification with them has brought to the foreground of our individual creative projects our shared pedagogical histories, philosophies, and practices. The prominence of our teaching practice—not just as a means to pay the bills—but as a subject of mutual discourse and retooling has introduced the possibility that pedagogy is not just one of the most vital pillars of our sustenance (e.g. our jobs), but an integral part of that same creative discourse that began way back under the glorious fluorescent glow of our local suburban K-Mart.

**Two becoming one**

I started teaching in 1998 at Gallery Rompecabezas. Located in the Chicago suburb of Melrose Park, a suburb populated predominately by Mexican immigrants and their kids—like me—the so-called first-generation Mexican Americans. I was contracted by the town’s church leaders to begin this after-school-art-center, which aimed to serve middle-school-aged kids with the typical after-school art curriculum (e.g. drawing, painting, ceramics, printmaking, etc.). This group of community leaders envisioned the after school center in an understandably limited way and I have to be honest—not having had any official training in education—I also thought that the center would be a place where art skills were taught and learned. Uncertified and fresh out of fine arts undergraduate school—and most importantly, not paid—I was free to experiment as much as I wanted with the curriculum and pedagogy of the center. Gallery Rompecabezas emerged as an experimental lab where—through the filter (or excuse) of the activities of art—relationships were fostered, conversations about identity were unwrapped, the world
was investigated (the greater Chicago area that is), and the possibility of a life that didn’t have to lead to gang involvement was made a little more concrete for all the center’s participants.

My experience at Gallery Rompecabezas was characterized by my ignorance of pedagogy as an academic field. Not unlike Alberto and mine’s initial foray into the world of becoming artists, my ignorance of how certain things had to be done in a pedagogical situation actually opened up approaches, which I may not have explored had I been formally trained as a teacher. In the end I think that I prioritized what I had learned about how people should be treated and how individuals could have a fulfilling lived experience, over any specific concern for the subject matter or the form in which I delivered the pedagogical moment. Gallery Rompecabezas was a people first, art second experiment.

What has unfolded for me in the thirteen years since Gallery Rompecabezas is an interpenetration of my art and teaching practices; a process founded on the DIY experiences of collaborating with Alberto to become artists and teaching at Gallery Rompecabezas, while discovering that I wanted to be a people-first-artist and teacher. Both of these DIY experiences were primarily motivated by an ideal that aimed towards doing something powerful in whichever way seemed best, regardless of know-how or expertise. This interpenetration—as can be imagined—has not been a clean process and it seems like the more I learn—in both art and pedagogy—the sloppier the whole endeavor becomes. Currently, my merged practices manifest themselves in the seemingly contradictory forms of contemporary art and school—school being distinguished from education as not necessarily the same thing. Filled with exhibitions, objects,
performances, artist’s talks, philosophical discussions, and critiques, as well as the occasional bouts of sheer, unavoidable institutional school labor (e.g. filling out forms, giving out grades, “policing” student behavior), 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. And it is in these moments—these moments of grappling with the rules and contrasting expectations—that I feel most like an artist and admittedly most like the best, uncompromising, teacher I can imagine. These moments have become more frequent, almost regular, and so emerges this attempt within this dissertation to theorize my practice.

**Dissertation as artwork**

The past thirteen years of trying to figure out how my teaching and creative practice coexist have culminated in the past four years of pedagogical and philosophical reflection, research, and theorizing; as well as a healthy dose of soul-searching and motive-checking. As I complete my PhD in art education at the Pennsylvania State University I find that my research and art have increasingly congealed into an amalgam of narratives surrounding my personal schooling; art, artists, and art theories that seem to share a kinship with my practice(s); and this relatively new task of intently reading other people’s philosophical and theoretical proposals while attempting to produce my own writing. Thinking about the construction of my dissertation on par with the construction of an artwork, the narratives about my personal experiences with education (both as a student and a teacher) have become the content of this project—that is, the material that I keep kneading, flipping, erasing, and re-imagining in order to provide an emergent
learning experience for myself and for the reader of this dissertation. The art and artists that I describe in this dissertation I’ve attached to those personal narratives as “permissions”\(^1\) or moments of precedence for some of the proposals I make about curriculum, pedagogy, and art practice. If nothing else, all the books and articles that I’ve read—in an attempt to leave “no stone unturned”—during this research project have provided a form for this type of qualitative, “authentic dissertation” (Jacobs, 2008, p. 3).

The “authentic” dissertation—whose label I found perplexingly unchallenged in the literature—is defined by Four Arrows, aka Don Trent Jacobs (2008) as—among other things—a creative work that

Focus[es] more on important questions than on research methodologies per se…move[s] away from an over-emphasis on academic writing if it tends to stifle creativity or one’s true voice…do[es] not fall for the myth of ‘objectivity’…remember[s] that art, music, and story telling are living information systems…[is] situated in experience…integrate[s] knowledge, scholarship, research, reflection, and practice. (p. 1-2)

Despite the obvious troubles with the use of the word “authentic” to describe it, I find that Jacobs’ proposal about this alternative way to execute a dissertation frees me to write a dissertation that is, first and foremost, integral with my practice as an artist and secondly purposeful for another person who may find themselves trying to further the interpenetration between their art and pedagogical interests and activities. Coming mostly from arts-based research and a/r/tographic discourses, the authors in Jacobs’ (2008)

\(^1\) Further unpacking of my use of the term “permissions” is found in Chapter One.
compendium *The authentic dissertation* repeatedly propose the importance of questions over answers, research as unfolding “living practice” (Irwin, 2008, p. 242), “un/unknown [one’s own] research” (Springgay, 2008, p. 245), and removing “artificial constraints” in our practices in order to “find new seas on which to sail rather than old ports at which to dock” (Eisner, 2008, p. 59).

**Dissertation sequence**

Now, whether or not, what I’m devising with this dissertation is “new seas”, I’m going to leave to others. I don’t think it is. I look at dissertations, articles, and books that deal with some of the same things I’m examining here and I don’t feel like I’m breaking any particular mold in terms of form. Alternatively though, I haven’t found the book on what I’m proposing in my dissertation in terms of content or strategy. Something—that to be honest is really quite simple—however could offer a range of possibilities to the stakeholders of art and pedagogical endeavors who have yet to manage moving out of a labor-equals-rigor emphasis in their creative and pedagogical practices.

A labor-equals-rigor emphasis in both, creative and pedagogical practices is a mode of working that equates the amount of effort and time a practitioner puts into a particular task—or set of tasks—with the actual cultural, intellectual, economic, and pedagogical worth of whatever is produced as a result of that task’s enactment. For example, approaches to making art such as tracing, machine or computer generating, outsourcing the work’s manufacturing, dematerialization, or even something like collage are typically lower on the value scale when compared to works of art that are either hand-crafted, visibly complex, time-saturated, and dripping of blood, sweat, and tears.
This weighting of labor is evident from pre-school through college art education and finds its parallel in pedagogical practices that place an inordinate emphasis on mastery, linearity, historical cannons, tradition, discipline, grades, and social hierarchies. The labor-equals-rigor model ignores the situational makeup of a given product, practice, or proposal and therefore loses the opportunity to encounter something wholly new emerging from areas unexamined due to their unfair reputation of—either—ease, laziness, or quotidian simplicity.

In this dissertation I’ve identify several conceptual artists and movements who resist the labor-equals-rigor model and I analyze their approach in order to borrow their modes of operation (MO) for a proposal that allows pedagogy to become an activity on par with—if not as—contemporary art practice. This motion of “borrowing” I call “gathering permissions” above and will be one of the first terms I unpack in the following chapter. In Chapter one: Unpacking definitions, I will propose an examination of some of the terms that I use throughout the rest of the dissertation. Far from a glossary though, chapter one is intended to situate—not only the nuances of some of the concepts I base this dissertation on—but also as a means to uncover other aspects of both art and pedagogy that I see as limiting the ability of a pedagogy as contemporary art practice.

Modes of operation (MO); Conceptual Art, specifically three kinds: durational art, relational aesthetics, and civic engagement art; curriculum, particularly the non-linear concept of currere; and contemporary art practice as pedagogy are further unpacked in Chapter one. All these terms—with the exception of contemporary art practice as pedagogy—are clearly defined in the literature but I will propose different
understandings of them in order to help feed the conversation about pedagogy-as-
contemporary-art’s possibilities.

In Chapter Two I will lay out an explanation of what I mean by “pedagogy as
contemporary art”. By examining William Pinar’s theorizing of the concept of currere—or living curriculum—I will demonstrate the similarities between pedagogy and art that can allow them to become a singular practice for some. I will give two examples of how I’ve grappled with this notion; first in the classroom (pushing it towards art) and secondly in an art show (pushing it towards pedagogy).

Chapter Three will be a bit of a step back—a review—if you will. There have been many historical examples of conceptual practitioners whose work is laced or reminiscent of pedagogical agendas. For me, some of the most fascinating examples come from Latin America. In part, this interests me because I see Latin American conceptualism as part of my own intellectual heritage, particularly when it comes to my identity and class politics. I also find the idea that most of the work I present in chapter three is deeply rooted in the everyday social realities of those individual practitioners’ local communities. This becomes extremely relevant to the dynamics of the face-to-face pedagogical situations I argue can be transformed into contemporary art moments. I will present the case of a group of Mexican artists from the decade right after the Mexican Revolution (1920s). Los Estridentistas were a group of poets, artists, architects, teachers, and government officials who sought—not unlike other Futurist and Dada influenced groups in South America—to free themselves from the constraints of an undemocratic, bourgeoisie society. Unlike the European movement though, Estridentismo actually made political and cultural in-roads, which caused significant change for many facets of
contemporary Mexican society, particularly in the states of Veracruz and in el D. F. (the federal district of the capital). I will also examine the mode of operations of Francis Alýss, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Luis Camnitzer, Maris Bustamante, and Leon Ferrari.

In Chapter Four I will examine a five-year collaboration between the students of Northside College Prep, the Chicago performance group Goat Island, and myself as we attempted to discover what it might mean to conduct a pedagogy as a contemporary art practice. The analysis of this collaboration that occurred during the time that I taught in the Chicago Public Schools will show how Goat Island develop pedagogical and performance experiences alongside more than fifty students. My involvement with the group stands as a filter through which I cannot help but see all my other pedagogical and artistic endeavors. In other words, Goat Island stands as a pivotal juncture both in my pedagogical and my artistic development and—most importantly—the first moments where I began to see that pedagogy as contemporary art practice was a philosophical practice. In the conclusion to chapter three, I will analyze Goat Island’s MO and critically present several of the pedagogical cues I’ve developed because of my involvement with the group. Specific student works and experiences will be catalogued and contextualized in order to further elucidate a strategy that allows teachers to borrow MOs from artists and maybe more importantly, this chapter will propose that the teacher’s MO is equally as important as one through which an artist operates and can also be shared with students. In both cases, whether it’s the teacher looking to the artist or the artist looking to the teacher, Helene Cixous’s (1994) words can both humble and encourage my efforts here. Cixous said: “What I have learned cannot be generalized, but it can be shared” (p. 7), revealing the magnitude of the learning that we do as individuals, while simultaneously
proposing that—despite that magnitude—what one has learned can still be passed along to others even if its just in increments or as suggestions. What Cixous proposes here is to keep the circulation of what one has acquired going, even if it is just in part. Lewis Hyde (1979) also speaks to this in his book *The gift*, where he makes an emphasis on the kind of growth that can be spurred by the simple act of passing what one received along. Now, whether or not that is education is left up to the participants. Through the realization that pedagogy-as-contemporary-art was—first and foremost—a philosophical project, which I had during my collaboration with Goat Island; I began to recognize that this philosophy could be shared with others. In other words, the collaboration with Goat Island was the first instance where I recognized that I could even be involved in a pedagogical moment that involved other teachers.

**Chapter Five** of this dissertation further connects the MOs identified in chapter three and four with an autoethnographic narrative I wrote about my early schooling experiences. The chapter includes the entirety of an autoethnographic performance text that I wrote when I was invited by my friend Alberto Aguilar to give an artist talk at Harold Washington College in Chicago. Originally this narrative was submitted as my comprehensive exam and is told in seven parts. This chapter will include the text of the performance (meaning the comprehensive examination) and an analysis of the performance of this text with its pedagogical implications. The text is a chronological retelling of my personal educational history, in particular my encounter with seven teachers that modeled an emancipatory pedagogy, which in retrospect also resonates with my idea of how pedagogy can be a work of contemporary art. I will establish how the MOs of these seven educators similarly relied on approaches akin to conceptual artists’
ways of being and making. Deviation, failure, prioritizing, aestheticizing, relating, collaborating, recognition of difference, spiritual reverence, creative response, problem solving, patience, and critical analysis were all key components of my own teachers’ MOs and I tell the stories of how these characteristics manifested in my teachers’ pedagogies and how I eventually appropriated some of those same approaches to my pedagogy as contemporary art practice. My observations over the years, including my direct reaction to my own teachers’ MOs, not only explicitly provoked my pedagogical pursuits, but also implicitly prepared the groundwork for my current conceptual art practice, which includes all of my pedagogical, spiritual, familial, civic, creative, research, and social actions. As I mentioned, this narrative which was originally presented as my comprehensive exam, was also performed as a lecture entitled Teaching as an artwork of multiple middles by five of my former students and myself. A theoretical analysis of what the performing of this text produced for my conceptual art/emancipatory pedagogy brackets the performance text. Because of its introspective nature, this chapter unearthed latent aspects of my experience in American schooling that ultimately problematize my observation of my teachers’ MOs—particularly when it came to discovering my racial identity.

The conclusion to this dissertation, Chapter Six, will contextualize my experience as a first generation Mexican-American navigating the complexities of class, privilege, and race in American schooling and art education that I describe in the performance text of chapter five. This chapter, takes its lead from what critical race theorist Tara Yosso (2006) called a “critical race counterstory” (p. 11). Invoking the ideas of Latino conceptual art theorist Luis Camnitzer (2007) and curator and author Chon Noriega
(2008) I will place the Latino conceptual art experience—with its consistent political and social activist MOs—alongside my experience and proposal that teaching and conceptual art MO’s have corresponding characteristics. Camnitzer, in particular, argues for a different understanding of Latin American conceptual art as it compares with Western conceptual art modes of operation. He draws connections through historical moments of social unrest and political upheaval in Latin American countries that eventually lead to a heightened social awareness, manifest particularly—and perhaps most poignantly—through Latin America’s conceptual artists (See Farver, 1999; Rolnick, 1999; David, 1999; Fusco, 2000; Gomez-Pena, 2000; Osthoff, 2000; and Mosquera, 2010).

By juxtaposing my own pedagogical emancipation through conceptual art at the tail end of Latin America’s conceptual contributions, my dissertation presents Camnitzer’s (2009) own proclamation of having “left Expressionism…[to] arrive at a pedagogical expression, a mixture of images and language that later would be included in the category of conceptual art” (p. 28) as having a liberating effect that goes beyond breaking outside of the formal constraints of—something like—the studio art practice. What then arises is more of a concern with an agenda that leads towards social justice and a more aware personal existence; one that isn’t as dependent on significations of authority or expertise, and doesn’t wait around to be given permission.

As John Dewey identified in the words of British biologist C.D. Darlington, the teacher as scientist or—as I would put it, contemporary artist—is an agitator, one who performs “a ministry of disturbance, a regulated source of annoyance, a destroyer of routine, and underminer of complacency” (cited in Dewey, 1920, p. 263). And it is in this rupture that many of the ideals of progressive educational theorists can emerge. We begin
to see the emancipatory and ethical proposals of Paulo Friere (1998) and bell hooks (1994; 2003; 2010), which promote agency for the learner and trouble trivializations of identity. Ideas about caring and proximity (see Noddings, 2005) also begin to manifest themselves as the pedagogical situation turns towards questions of ethics and otherness (see Todd, 2003). The whole project exists as an alternative reality, which is made more palpable through the filter of a pedagogy that is a contemporary art practice. Pedagogy as contemporary art practice and contemporary art practice as pedagogy can unearth—for pedagogical stakeholders—an education, instead of just an endured “schooling”. My experience as a teacher of high school students, art education majors, studio artists, art teachers, and other ancillary members of the community tells me that this alternative reality is one pedagogical stakeholders are dying for.
Chapter 1

Unpacking definitions
Unpacking “unpacking definitions”

It is important not to gloss over this chapter’s subtitle since in its two-word pairing “unpacking definitions” carries for me a complex debate about several seriously ingrained tendencies that continuously resurface in my work as an artist, researcher, and teacher. Originally subtitled “definition of terms”, chapter one’s seemingly harmless title has revealed itself to be an inadequate headline for this chapter’s content and my objectives while writing it. Frankly, I suspect that the more generic headline, “definition of terms”, would have probably gone unexamined by most readers, as it is a descriptor that—although misleading—would have triggered the least amount of confusion due to its uncomplicated signification and its potential to be ignored as a mere placeholder. Using the title “definition of terms” would have exempted me from writing this reflection on its use.

With every revision of this chapter’s text though, I’ve become increasingly convinced that—in actuality—I define very little and instead, unpack a slew of previously defined terms (e.g. Conceptual art, mode of operation, bricolage, etc.), strewing them about, losing parts of them, and ultimately ad-hoc-like rejoining what appears useful back together. Starting with something that felt like science—clearly packaged, well considered, and user-friendly—what I’ve done with the definition of terms in this chapter is on par with Sisyphus’ impossible task. I push this philosophical boulder up the hill only to see it roll down again upon reaching what appears to be the summit of clarity. The academic equivalent of taking everything out of a tightly packed box, only to doubt—once empty—how all these things ever fit into the box in the first place, this messy conundrum doesn’t seem to be much of problem to most researchers.
I’ve yet to speak to a researcher or read a good piece of qualitative research that doesn’t explicitly or implicitly express the above sentiment about research’s—sometimes-contradictory—duel intentions to—both—close and open a query. Often reveling in the prospect that a singular attempt at clarification usually engenders a manifold of—proportionally more complex—questions for further examination, most researchers (artists particularly) tend to desire—if not need—for this perpetual unpacking to happen.

So it’s okay, right? What’s my problem? It seems rather redundant and naïve to say that this philosophical dissertation is going to not clear anything up. So, why bring this up at all? Well, it is important for me to bring this up now because at this point in my scholarship I struggle, not with the reality of this contradiction, but with what my free inhabitance within this contradiction says about me as a critical pedagogue. I worry about the tone of my scholarship. How does what I say in my writing sound to the reader and how is what I say as a writer relating/reflecting on who I am as an in-the-flesh teacher?

Since becoming a teacher I’ve been increasingly trying to equalize the field that the pedagogical moment occurs on. I assume correctly most of the time, that students carry with themselves knowledge that is foreign to me and therefore I should offer the type of pedagogical structure, which validates that knowledge as well as allows all of the participants in a pedagogical situation to learn from this knowledge. However, as you will see in this dissertation, the teacher-tone is strong and it always manages to justify its emergence.

I suppose it is not obvious what the teacher-tone is, so I’ll define it. The teacher-tone is a manner of writing or speaking about one’s research that mimics the positioning
that takes place in the in-the-flesh pedagogical moments typically characterized by an established hierarchy of authority and expertise. The teacher-tone is used to tell students what to do and how to do it. It presumes a clearly delineated continuum of “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 1999, p. 43)—meaning, what people “know”—that privileges the teacher’s “funds” and contributions above the student’s. Didactic, occasionally paternalistic, although usually well intentioned, the use of the teacher-tone is often cluelessly rooted in an insensitive sense of its own authority. The teacher-tone is institutionally fortified by the fact that although the sense of its own authority may be unnecessarily aggrandized, its designation is established by heavily lauded—traditionally entrenched—gatekeepers of specific professional accreditations and licensures (e.g. college degrees, tenure, lines on CVs, teaching certifications, job titles, or other professional designations), cultural norms (e.g. traditions, social expectations, language and age differences), and literacies (e.g. subject, institutional, political, or economic). The disproportionate weighting of what labels allow which people to say what things to which people is at the crux of the misuse of the teacher-tone.

I know that it’s ironic to talk about the teacher-tone while using the teacher-tone, but I think its use here underlines the difficulty I feel in the teacher-tone’s occasional emergence even in the most egalitarian pedagogical endeavors. I’ll qualify my definition of the teacher-tone by stating that I have witnessed its usage in many teachers’ pedagogical practices, even though I have not actually come across a text that identifies it as such. Critical Pedagogy theorists come the closest to identifying the teacher-tone with their emphasis on the democratic responsibilities and aspirations for (and through) education, identifying some version of the teacher-tone as the de facto antagonist of their
particular experiential and participatory narrative. My Deweyan heart follows the
direction of the Critical Pedagogues, I have to admit, but sometimes my actions, words,
and tone contradict my desire to break down pedagogical hierarchies. Reverting to the
teacher-tone, for me, is wrought through caring though—I hope—and not an unjustified
illusion of my idea’s surety. At all moments in this dissertation—even when it seems like
I’m positive about what I am saying—I am open to be shown otherwise.

Having grown up around countless amateur and semi-professional preachers—I
am fully aware that my first model for a teacher, researcher, and even artist was the
biblical prophet; the fur-covered, unshaven, locust-eating, homeless John the Baptist who
was “the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘prepare the way of the Lord, make his
paths straight’” (Mark 1:3, NKJV). Later—when I was knee-deep into my teaching
practice, surrounded by the heterogeneous reality of my individual students and
colleagues—I came upon a frequently cited collection of New Testament admonitions
where the author, “James”, outlines the potential pitfalls of an overly confident teacher-
ton(gu)e:

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall
receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone
does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man (sic), able also to bridle the
whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses’ mouths that they may obey us,
and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so
large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small
rudder, wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member
and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! (James
3:1-5, NKJV)

This disclaimer, you would think, should have been in the beginning of this dissertation—even before the introduction—but it appears here, at the beginning of the first chapter because it is during this task of “defining” terms—of potentially kindling an uncontrollable fire with my words—that my tendency to slide into teacher-tone will be the most pronounced. I confess, that although I proceed with great caution (a caution I learned as an academic) I give myself permission to construct my words with a prophet’s urgency (a habit I picked up as an artist).

Unpack permissions

What I’m speaking about when I say “permissions” could be called “artistic license”, but I will call it “permissions” in order to bypass any connotations “artistic license” has as a copout that is often used by those who talk about art to excuse mediocre, outlandish, or even gratuitously provocative work. For me, the idea of “permissions” goes back to my early undergraduate days and all the time I spent looking at art books, wandering the halls of the Art Institute’s museum collections, listening to lectures, visiting Chicago’s gallery districts, attending performances, watching films, looking at all the art that was prolifically produced by the students at SAIC (including my studio-mate Alberto), participating in conversations, browsing through art magazines and studying the visual cues in things that weren’t readily designated as “fine” art (e.g. signs, architecture, topiaries, “outsider” art, home décor, and fashion).

Essentially all of this looking—which I later learned could be understood as research—expanded for me, specifically, what was possible in art-making, but also in
what was now permissible for me in other practices—particularly practices that were not
typically seen as aesthetic—like pedagogy. Some of these permissions, uncovered
through looking at art, initiated alterations of behavior in areas of my life (e.g. parenting,
teaching, cooking) where I had previously thought there was a prescribed way to behave.2
I will outline some of the newer permissions that I’ve come across in the subsequent
chapters, but I think its safe to say that a large amount of those permissions were
uncovered in the practices, lifestyle, and teaching approaches of artists themselves,
particularly artist who share a heritage with the traditions of Dada and Surrealism.

To further clarify permissions here—although wanting to stress that I don’t see
the process as clear cut as I’m demarcating it here—I want to propose a sequence of how
permissions can be gathered. This is my process. Derived from years of enacting it; it’s a
process I now enact unconsciously and wish to stress that I’m only theorizing it in these
pages for argument’s sake. Therefore I think that many readers will have an actual
visceral reaction to this list, considering the fact that I’m dissecting something that I
believe to be pretty common amongst those of us who are interested in making and
looking at what is made. The process of obtaining permissions usually follows this
sequence:

2 Gallery Rompecabezas, which I mention in my introduction and my first official
“teaching” position, predates this “permissions” discovery. What I unknowingly
attempted at that art center was to conduct a pedagogical experience as an artwork.
Without actually knowing that I was doing this, Gallery Rompecabezas was more of a
reaction to other modes of schooling, which I knew I did not want to emulate. So I think
its important to note that my “gathering permissions” mode of doing, which I heavily
attribute to art in this dissertation, also finds connections in how I “gathered permissions”
from my schooling experience.
1. See a thing (even if its a thing you had seen before). Don’t judge it.

Withholding judgment or suspending judgment altogether allows you to examine what you are seeing without the interference of your taste, which can sometimes inhibit you from looking at something that may be brimming with permissions that will expand one’s immediate understanding.

2. Recognize what new thing that thing is doing that you didn’t know was possible (even if its not related to your current work). Note: the term “possible” here needn’t mean physically or materially possible. It could also mean possible within or in contrast to a cultural set of rules, be they semantic, traditional, or having to do with taste or politics.

3. Recognize what you are seeing as a “permission” (even if you lack the resources or interest to “behave” through that permission).

4. Store the permission in your artistic “quiver” (i.e. personal art lexicon) for:

   a. Later use in your own work.

   b. Reference in the examination of some other thing—including other’s artworks (e.g. critique, synthesis, and analysis; but also further permission-gathering).

   c. Easy sharing with others who may more appropriately use the permission in their own productions (i.e. formal and informal pedagogy, collaboration, curating, etc.).
d. Appropriation into your own personal lifestyle choices. This one is by far the trickiest one, since the researcher who is discovering these permissions must be willing to conflate parts of his or her life and art in order for this permission’s cross-pollination to occur. I found that in the twenty-plus years since I have been studying art, artists’ lives and personalities have become an equal strand of critical discourse and examination as artists’ work, therefore opening up the artist persona as an equal—if not superior—field for permission-gathering alongside an artist’s art productions.

Now granted, the development of this permission-gathering practice—as I’m describing it here—is based on an experience with art that is bedrocked in the Western art academy and the orientation of that particular art culture’s politics, history, and pedagogy, which are inevitably complex beyond the scope of what my point at this moment is.³ What I’m trying to show, is much more simple in that it is merely a path to develop an openness to new modes of working by becoming a hyper-aware observer, who withholds judgment

³ I understand that the whole practice of gathering permissions is imbedded into the trajectory of Western art discourse and academia—if for no other reason—than because that is the “field” that I teach in. I’ve not yet reached—and I don’t know if I ever will (or even want to)—a place in my pedagogy, art practice, or scholarly examinations where my critical understanding of art doesn’t filter through my early art education rooted in the content, as well as the mode of understanding that begins and ends with the very specific—however broadly understood—construct of the Western “art world”. I also understand that my attempt—as well of many others who have been doing this much longer than I—to be inclusive of multicultural contributions into the cannon of art and art pedagogy is still policed by a gate of entry that is undeniably aligned with the interests and sensibilities of the Western academy. I have a hard time envisioning when this will be otherwise.
and personal taste, in order to open up a wider perspective, which carries a more sophisticated, contemporary, and potentially inventive visual vocabulary for enacting actions in the world. One can imagine that I am speaking about pedagogy here, but we don’t have to go there yet.

Yes, I believe it really is quite that simple—it is a process that has been replicated time and time again and quite often only needs a practitioner who is willing to never be satisfied in their collection of how to interpret the world and how they manufacture their particular say in the world, since it is—in fact—a never ending task. That’s it. That is what will be found in this dissertation. Examples of artists’ works, behaviors, and words, which I will position in order to open up the possibilities of what a pedagogue can be and do, especially in regards to contemporary art practices. I believe that a pedagogue is a conceptual polyglot—activist, philosopher, and creative practitioner—who even in the most institutionalized setting can “discover a [work of art] by making it”. The teacher comes into the pedagogical moment as a collaborative participant and over time contributes in the development of—not only the ethos of that moment—but also, a nebulous, idea-saturated, atmosphere of incomplete propositions, unanswered questions, and failed—however not dead—experiments. The pedagogue works as an artist, not because they are “creative”, but rather, because they are “conceptual”. This statement merely needs to be qualified by shifting the focus of what an artist can be from the so-called creative artist (predominately a maker of objects) to the more contemporary phenomenon of the conceptual artist (predominately a presenter and researcher of ideas).
Unpacking mode of operation?

If I can move the spotlight from the object-making artist to the artist who presents and researches through ideas, then I need to answer the question: If we are not looking towards the artist object for “permissions” than what are we looking at? I would answer it by saying, that many conceptual artists are mostly known by artifacts. Now, the artists themselves may produce these artifacts, but often they are things that remain after the concept has been grappled with. I’ll return to this in a moment when I unpack conceptual art. But I can’t do that until I point to the artist’s manner of working, their mode of operation (MO).

My use of the acronym MO for “mode of operation” is distinct from the MO that stands for *modus operandi*, normally associated with the description of criminal behavior. Although it’s tempting to connect artists’ MOs to some sort of deviancy—as Lewis Hyde (1998) suggests in his book *Trickster makes this world*—that is not my intention here. The artists that Hyde speaks of are implicated in some kind of conscious subversion that ultimately exposes the parts of the unseen world to the seeing world. Although this may be the case for some artists, even the artists I’ll be examining, when I speak of the artist’s MO I’m referring to a more subtle aspect of their manner of practice. How do these artists go about their business as creative practitioners, frequently navigating the overlaps of researcher, activist, philosopher, celebrity, teacher, interlocutor and private citizen?

Unlike modus operandi, my modified “mode of operation” seeks to imply less intentionality on behalf of the artist. In many ways, I see artists’ modes of operation as frequently un-intentional—maybe even involuntary—or what is often referred to as
“second-nature”. As the etymology of “intention” implies, “in-tend” indicates that an individual would “direct one’s attention to” (Barnhart and Steinmetz, 1999, p. 535) or “tend” to whatever was being enacted. This is exactly what I’m implying is inherent to modus operandi and missing from my use of “mode of operation”. Mode of operation doesn’t hinge on constant purposefulness or directed attention. Although it is important to distinguish that MO is not accidental, it is more open, multi-model, everyday, and harder to define then modus-operandi.

All this is not to say that the artist’s MO is without purpose or impetus. In the case of the artist’s case studies that I’ll be examining in the subsequent chapters, it is evident that they are aware—at least in part—of their MOs, in particular their pedagogical MOs. It may seem like I’m introducing something new here, the ideation that any aspect of these artists’ practices is consciously pedagogical, but whether this is true or not (and how I arrived at this conclusion) I will save for my actual discussion of those artist MOs. At this point, it is important to understand that if pedagogy in its relation to the act of educating is, as Paulo Friere (1998) stated, “that specifically human act of intervening in the world” (p. 99), then it is not a far stretch to identify artist practices as pedagogical. What happens is that the pedagogical aspect of their practice—with its ultra-conceptual, non-tangible aura—is often marginalized in relation to the presentation of their more public and consumable artworks. In order to recognize the pedagogical MO for artists who aren’t primarily known as educators, a researcher would have to take special note of these artists’ pedagogical idiosyncrasies and then make connections and inferences about their findings. For example, some artists who have had very active pedagogical personas, like the American composer John Cage and the Brazilian conceptualist Lygia Clark, often
have that part of their oeuvre recounted merely in passing and not as an integral part of their contribution to the education of future practitioners. A researcher would then have to foreground those aspects of their careers in order to further define their pedagogical MO. Other artists, like Gabriel Orozco, whose pedagogy exists mainly through his work and the documentation of his research processes via notebooks, interviews, photographs, and videos require an astute observer that can begin to recognize certain attitudes that make correlations between the artist’s works and Friere’s (1998) emancipatory pedagogical proposition that exposes education’s interventionist potential as an:

Aspiration for radical changes in society in such areas as economics, human relations, property, the right to employment, to land, to education, and to health, and to the reactionary position whose aim is to immobilize history and maintain an unjust socio-economic and cultural order. (p.99)

On this level of investigation, my use of MO actually is related to the MO of criminology, in that most of my conclusions about artists’ pedagogical ways of being are made through exhaustive detective work and the collating of my findings into solid “leads”.

Gathering permissions from artists’ MOs is reliant on some of this detective work, but it is also requires the persona of an alchemist, someone who pieces together—with a touch of faith and irresponsibility—moments of disparate information with the hopes that something—if not sensible—at least useful, will emerge. The ambiguity that comes from these piecemeal MOs makes them less about what the artist actually is, and more about how the artist seems. For this reason I’ve succinctly defined my use of the acronym MO
as *ways of being*—playing, not only with the title of John Berger’s (1973) experimental visual culture book *Ways of seeing* (which juxtaposes written as well as pictorial essays in order to identify them both as text), but also infusing it with some phenomenological flavor.

This “phenomenological flavor” exists because Berger’s book needs to be experienced and it can be experienced differently every time it is picked up. Dissuading the reader from “reading” *Ways of seeing* in the manner in which a book might be read (i.e. sequentially), Berger states that the “the form of the book [has] as much to do with [my] purpose as the arguments contained within it” (p.5). Berger continues his directions on how to approach his collection of essays stating that the seven parts contained in the book “can be read in any order”; ending with the disclaimer that, “none of the essays pretends to deal with more than certain aspects of each subject…[my] principle aim has been to start a process of questioning” (p. 5).

In this way, I also identify the gathering of permissions through artist’s MOs as bricolage (a mode of operation that I unpack under the *Unpacking bricolage* segment of this chapter). The MO, a research-bricolage, which identifies artists’ behaviors in relation to their artworks, as well as the writings about the artist under examination also proposes that any findings must be left open for further scrutiny and not be treated as closed statements. From here we can pick at that “phenomenological flavor” by further defining the word “being” in my definition of MO as *ways of being*. I want to do this by gently skirting the ontological challenge of *dasein* (Being) that Martin Heidegger and later Emmanuel Levinas grappled with during the twentieth century. Heidegger (1977) presented *dasein* as “what it is” as opposed to “what it’s like”. He stated that,
We call many things ‘existent’, and in different senses. Everything we talk about, mean, and are related to in such and such a way is in being. What and how we ourselves are is also in being. Being is found in thatness and whatness, reality, the objective presence of things, subsistence, validity, existence, and in the “there is”. (p. 47)

Levinas would later take issue with Heidegger’s “objective presence of things” by challenging the point that the “what it is” of an object was different then the “what it is” of a person, implying that with people the Being of a person was—in fact—more like a “what it’s like”. This is not surprising considering Levinas’ preoccupation with ideas of otherness. This is best captured in his 1951 examination of the Heideggerian dasein. Levinas (1951/1996) states, “The person with whom I am in relation I call being, but in so calling him, I call to him [italics mine]… I have spoken to him, that is to say, I have neglected the universal being that he incarnates in order to remain with the particular being he is” (p. 7). It is from this differentiation that I borrow the permission for my idea of the MO as an unintentional, multi-angled, concern for the “particularities” of individuals. From Levinas’s differentiation, MO allows for an artist’s ambiguous gestures to be interpreted through a scholarly lens. My use of MO allows for the examination of any part of the artist’s phenomenological being, including what the artist thinks about their being, what others’ being is in relation to the artist’s being, and even the accidental or inferred artist’s ways of being.

According to Levinas (1996), ontology, or the study of being, “is the essence of every relation with beings” (p. 4), meaning one to an other; and even “of every relation in being” (p. 4), meaning within itself. Interviews, videos of the artist at work, research
essays, narratives recounted by those who knew the artists and biographical documentation open up an interpretive space for these ways of being or MOs to be unwrapped. Identifying the artist MO is only important as a first step and I use Levinas’ attention to particularities—as a means to distinguish between humans and other things—as my guide in this part of the process. After identifying particularities we move into the simultaneous manifold interpretations that Edmund Husserl (1954/1970) suggested with his “alteration of validity” (p. 161).

Husserl describes this phenomenological process through perception, or how the eyes examine. He contrasts the “straightforward” perception with what he identifies as giving his “kinesthese free play” (p. 161), noting that this allows the viewer (permissions-gather) to “experience concurrent exhibitings as [or like] belonging to it is the consciousness sustained of the one thing in actual presence, exhibiting itself in manifold [italics mine] fashions as itself” (p. 161). Again, this is a patchwork activity, to which an unpacking of the process of bricolage would service it well. I will further give a definition of what I mean by a bricolage and the bricoleur’s sensibility in the next section and further when I talk about the civic engagement practice of the sociologist Dwight Conquergood (see Chapter One, p. 76). For now it is sufficient to say that the bricoleur’s sensibility involves the interpretation of two or more particularities placed adjacent to one another. It is through this analysis of adjacent or juxtaposed “particularities” that the artist MO can be identified and consequently garnered of its permissions.
Unpacking bricolage

Research is a form of bricolage and the researcher is a bricoleur. The bricoleur is a trickster, a person who is a jack-of-all-trades, a person who can fix things with the materials that are at hand, a nurse’s aide who performs a tracheotomy with a knitting needle. The bricoleur uses what works. It is like a baroque method, it resists clarity. It is radically uncertain, it might not work the next time. It is an interpretive method. (Denzin, 2010, p. 36)

I want to talk about bricolage, but not collage objects. I want to talk about the process of bricolage since it is after all a very popular—and arguably the most significant—mode of operation, employed by Western artists after the 1920s, really picking up steam on this side of the 1960s. In my investigation of the terms collage and bricolage, I have come to realize that—although often conflated—they do not mean the same thing. A collage is a thing; a thing made up of two things. A bricolage is a process; a process enacted by a bricoleur that involves the juxtaposition of two or more things. Bricolage is a mode of operation. Since I want to focus on the process I thought it important to begin with a working definition of the bricoleur. Norman Denzin, qualitative researcher and ethnographic theorist, in the previous block quote offers us one such definition, but his take on the bricoleur originates in anthropology.

French anthropologist and eventual philosopher Claude Levi-Strauss (1966), brings up the term for investigation in his critical study of—what at the time—was understood to be indigenous peoples’ so-called “savage minds”. Levi-Strauss uses the
term bricoleur to talk about a person who approaches problems through an ad-hoc manner. Ad-hoc may be too loaded of a characteristic here, when Levi-Strauss was really just trying to say something akin to folk knowledge or what he calls “prior” (p. 16) know-how. He uses this term, “prior” to make his first—and what turned out to be culture shifting—disavowal of the deprecating term “primitive” that was commonly used in reference to indigenous peoples’ intelligence. Unwittingly perhaps, Levi-Strauss pits the bricoleur against what some might have argued preferable at a time in the West when homogeneity was deemed the ultimate goal of education, and maybe even democracy; the “craftsman” (p. 17) or engineer. The craftsman is the one who knows before arriving at the problem what he is doing. The descriptors Levi-Strauss uses to describe this man of prior knowledge (craftsman) in comparison to the one of ad-hoc means (bricoleur) can be interpreted as condescending—even though Levi-Strauss’ intention has proven over time to uplift the perception by the West of those people whom are designated bricoleurs. Because of the role that art and artists play in creating subversion as well as in taking something that appears to be discarded or devalued and elevate it to the point of reconsideration, Levi-Strauss’s words can actually be used as positive descriptors of what the bricoleur can be. The bricoleur has become somewhat respectable, if not for his or her ability to flex their expertise, than for their ingenuity and their ability to solve problems on the fly. We can derive—in our current Postmodern condition—that Levi-Strauss’s description of what leads to the enactment of bricolage—that is, being an ad-hoc, problem-solving, resourceful, conjurer—has now serendipitously aligned itself with the needs of the day. Levi-Strauss hints to the bricoleur’s manner as dependent on a

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4 I am aware of the condescending paradox that this statement presents, but feel as if any further discussion of it here would deter me further from what I’m trying to put forth.
“heterogeneous repertoire” (p. 17), which he actually has no other choice but to use, since
the bricoleur, “has nothing else at [his] disposal” (p. 17). It’s as if Levi-Strauss is
describing a contemporary practitioner (artist perhaps or pedagogue as contemporary
artist)—motivated by a need to constantly make—maybe with the intent of stumbling
into understanding—over a need to make in a manner that addresses a prefabricated
outcome or previously understood idea.

The ‘bricoleur’ is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but,
unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the
availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the
purpose of the project. (p. 17)

In other words, the bricoleur “makes do” (p. 17), that is, works with what he/she has.
Another characteristic that Levi-Strauss puts on the bricoleur is that of being somewhat
of a scavenger and a hoarder. The bricoleur, according to Levi-Strauss doesn’t
necessarily gather the specific materials for the project or problem at hand. The bricoleur
gathers materials whenever, storing them for later use. The materials of the bricoleur are
not gathered for an intent purpose, rather are “defined only by [their] potential use
or...because the elements are collected or retained on the principle that ‘they may always
come in handy’” (p. 17). Further, Levi-Strauss identifies the bricoleur as a sign-maker, a
user of something concrete to “resemble concepts in their power of reference” (p. 18). At
this point Levi-Strauss starts positioning the bricoleur as a meaning-maker, and this is
where the concept becomes increasingly useful for my investigation. At one moment,
while giving an example of a series of choices made by a bricoleur, he lets it be known
that sometimes the bricoleur’s decision can be read as either arbitrary or easily replaced
with another. He puts forth that in that specific instance “the possibility of putting a
different element there instead, so that each choice which is made will involve a complete
reorganization of the structure” (p. 18) could change the meaning of what is being
constructed and observed. This proposal is not unlike what happens in the most basic of
collages: one component is laid down, and then another. The maker, takes a figurative or
a literal “step-back”, examines the pairing and then makes editorial decisions about what
remains and what gets removed.

Again, let us remember that Levi-Strauss is placing his definition of the bricoleur
within a very narrow explication of how different people learn, have learned, and
consequently approach a particular problem. He calls the problem-solver who approaches
through tact, planning, and procurement “the engineer” and his opposite, the more
“primitive” and—seemingly instinctual—bricoleur. When Levi-Strauss ponders whether
“it might be said that the engineer questions the universe, while the ‘bricoleur’ addresses
himself to a collection of oddments left over from human endeavors” he might be stating
that, yes, the engineer is a problem-solver, while—in many ways—the bricoleur is a very
post-modern problem-rehash-er, if you will.

Being this re-hasher of problems is a conscious decision that the bricoleur thrives
on. This rehashing energy or impetus defines the bricoleur’s personality, as well as
his/her reason for behaving in certain ways.

The ‘bricoleur’ also, and indeed principally, derives his poetry from the
fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he
‘speaks’ not only with [italics in original] things, as we have already seen,
but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities. (p. 21)

This blurring of life, concept, and action that Levi-Strauss suggests here can also be seen as an asset in our unpacking of the bricoleur, which let’s not forget is different from one-who-makes-collage.⁵ In the end Levi-Strauss volunteers the inevitable by stating that it is—in fact—“art [which] lies half-way between scientific knowledge [via the engineer] and mythical or magical thought [via the bricoleur]” (p. 22) that he is touching on. He relates, “The artist is both something of a scientists and of a ‘bricoleur’. By his craftsmanship he constructs a material object which is also an object of knowledge” (p. 22). Wow! I’m not sure if he realized this, but flipping the sequence of this Levi-Strauss pronouncement so that it says, “constructs an object of knowledge, which is also a material object” puts the conceptual practicing bricoleur in a prominent position when it comes to identifying the kind of artist’s mode of operation I’m proposing we gather permissions from. The artists in this dissertation, who produce objects of knowledge, open up the possibilities for a pedagogical practice that is a contemporary art practice.

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⁵ The difference between bricoleur and one-who-makes-collage (aka collage artist) is not subtle. There can be a clear distinction drawn since the collage artist is actually a visual practitioner—defined quite literally—by their design production and their ability to replicate the pictorial cues of other—more ensconced—picture makers. The bricoleur, although capable of enacting their bricolage through collage is more of a do-er. Bricolage in this case is distinguished by its clear alignment with its approach to decision-making and problem solving. The bricoleur is not necessarily an aesthetic practitioner. Collage is something you make, bricolage is a mode of operation.
Before moving along, it would not be right to leave Levi-Strauss’s contributions to our understanding of the bricoleur’s mode of operation without acknowledging one other point he makes in this same opening chapter of *The Savage Mind*, where he makes his observations about the bricoleur. Towards the end of the chapter he analyzes some works of art from a tribal group. In his analyses he observes the characteristics of an object, which direct those who look at it to observe how the object was made. This semi-transparency of the “workings” of this artwork is something that bricolage frequently demonstrates. By the instance of bricolage allowing the observer to see it’s method of being made, its hand-madeness, or—for the sake of my argument—its mode of operation, Levi-Strauss puts forth that

The observer is in effect presented with the general picture of these permutations at the same time as the particular solution offered. [The viewer] is thereby transformed into an active participant without even being aware of it. Merely by contemplating it he is, as it were, put in possession of other possible forms of the same work; and in a confused way, he feels himself to be their creator with more right than the creator himself. (p. 24)

I’ll have to leave this here, since I will return to it when I talk about civic engagement art in the following section. I will however make a point about pedagogy here, since after all that is the intent of this entire project. What Levi-Strauss is proposing in this passage is a mode of operation, that when applied to pedagogy, can put the learner (e.g. student) in the drivers seat when it comes to creating and attaining knowledge. This proposal is
actually where I see many teachers and artist get stuck. A participatory practice, that allows others to, not only enter, but ultimately be led to create their own “things” and moments—based on the artists or the teachers creation or enacted moment—is at the heart of what I’m proposing here. The works and the pedagogy that a teacher as artist needs to put forth need to be open in this way and I believe that the conceptual turn in art, which started in the early part of the previous century—and which has become increasingly pedagogical—opens up plenty of passages through which we can begin to model our pedagogy as contemporary practice.

As I have noted, I will return to the bricoleur as meaning-maker in my unpacking of civic engagement art and will come back to this other idea of “active participants” when I speak about all of this work in relation to my idea of the “time bomb”. For now, it may be helpful to talk about art.

**Unpacking conceptual art**

To begin it is important to note that when I say “conceptual art” I’m not strictly speaking of the artworks made during the 60’s and 70’s in Europe and the U.S. that have been identified historically as the movement of Conceptual Art. What I’m pointing to is to a “less historical and more philosophical” (Goldie & Schellekens, 2007, p. xii) attitude in art practice that has been prevalent for several generations and across the continents, dating as far back as the social activism of the Italian Futurists and still manifesting itself in the transdisciplinary hodge-podge that many aspects of contemporary art currently are. Goldie and Schellekens as well as Newman and Bird (1999) distinguish the two kinds of conceptual art by capitalizing the “C” in the historically situated Conceptual art.
Additionally, Lucy Lippard (1997) uses the term “ultra-conceptual” to differentiate one type of conceptual practice from the axiom that—in fact—all art is to some degree conceptual. By using the prefix “ultra”, Lippard proposes an understanding of some conceptual art practices as “beyond” just art with ideas, stating that ultra-conceptual art was “distinguished…from Minimal painting and sculpture, earthworks, and other grand-scale endeavors, which appeared in the early sixties as abnormally cerebral” (p. vii). For my thesis, I will predominately rely on Goldie and Schellekens’ “more philosophical” definition, however I will occasionally use Lippard’s “ultra-conceptual” to make a distinction between any work that has an idea behind it (arguably, all art) and something that intentionally foregrounds the presence of the idea in the work without being historically situated within the parameters that would categorize it as big “C”-conceptual-art.

Previously I’ve described conceptual art by simply situating it as a form of making that prioritizes the idea of an artwork over its visual form. Although I will dedicate the next section of this proposal to more fully situating conceptual art—including how it has been understood from multiple viewpoints—I want to further the definition of what conceptual art can be by talking about how artists use time as a material. This discourse on time is intended to draw parallels to William Pinar’s four steps of currere, which I unpack in the next chapter. I bring it up here though, since currere is actually a curricular practice preoccupied with the materiality and malleability of time. By delineating a process that unfolds and re-folds unto itself, moving forward and backward simultaneously, stepping outside of itself and creating a self-consciousness about its own inner workings, Pinar positions curriculum through currere as something
that registers as an intellectual method which has a strong kinship to familiar processes in conceptual art. Currere, much like conceptual art practice, plays with the precariousness of its progression while simultaneously acting as its own antithesis in order to initiate discovery or learning. Currere and conceptual art are always different. Currere and conceptual art can be done by anyone.\footnote{Processes resembling currere and conceptual art are frequently enacted inadvertently.} Processes resembling currere and conceptual art are frequently enacted inadvertently.

Although conceptual art can be defined by its emphasis on the idea of an artwork over its visual form, in some cases artists attempted to eliminate the objectness or material of their artworks altogether. This was termed “dematerialization” (p. 46) by Lippard and Chandler (1999) in 1968, and it is the closest thing to an “ideal”, or tenet, associated with the amorphous and pluralistic proclivities of conceptual art. The ideal of dematerialization, however, proves to be a difficult proposition because it is not all that it promises to be. Dematerialization is an ironic term. Although dematerialization is often presented as the opposite of the object-oriented art world, it actually has a symbiotic relationship with it. Just looking at the conceptual artworks catalogued in museums, books, and on the Internet one can get a sense of how dematerialized artworks are re-materialized by the very archival remnants that facilitate their study. Books and exhibitions dedicated to preserving the legacy of conceptual artists working through dematerialization are a perfect example of how this irony arises.

Take the master’s thesis project of Patricia Norvell, a student of the artist Robert Morris in the late sixties. Norvell, a sculpture MFA candidate at Hunter College decided

\footnote{Feel free to skip to the section on currere if this temporary definition is insufficient at the moment. This section can be found at the beginning of page 89.}
to make a work that consisted of interviewing some of the more prominent conceptual
male artists living in New York at that time. She, with Morris’ aid, compiled a list of
desirable candidates and then set up appointments to conduct the interviews. Norvell had
a set list of questions that she asked her subjects, deviating only occasionally from her
script. For more than twenty years after completing the project, Norvell kept the
recordings in tape form, allowing almost none of the recordings to be transcribed and
published. She kept them this way, because she saw them as an artwork, “a process
piece” (Norvell, 2001, p. xiii), which she felt would be integrally transformed if
transcribed.

In 1992, while working on his PhD, Alexander Alberro (now a prominent theorist
of conceptual art practices) contacted Norvell and convinced her to transcribe and publish
the entire collection of interviews. They did it in a unique way. Alberro and Norvell
That’s right, the actual material book which is a three-quarters-pound object that I held in
my hand prior to typing this sentence is essentially a catalogue of minimally edited,
word-for-word transcriptions of the exchanges between Norvell and such artists as
Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Morris, Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner, Sol Lewitt, and
Robert Smithson, and others.

It may seem trivial, that I am emphasizing the tension that led up to the
transcription and publication of—what even Norvell now calls a historical document—
but it is exactly this tension that speaks to something about the transition that occurs
when an artist attempts to work through dematerialization only to inevitably give way to
the inertia of cultural capitalism with its weight of production and history that ironically
aim to make artworks consumable while simultaneously permanent. Alberro and
Norvell’s publication is but one example of how the dematerialized quality of
conversation (a pedagogical staple) can—given even just minimal demand—be packaged
and disseminated as effectively as any Sol Lewitt (a prominent conceptual artist)
retrospective (see Mass MOCA, 2011).

A single work of conceptual art may begin as dematerialized—if not in form, at
least in intention—and then become materialized; and then, maybe even cease being a
work of conceptual art altogether. Alan Kaprow (1993) proposed this same idea about the
semantic interplay associated with the materiality in conceptual art’s potential
metamorphosis 7:

Today, we may say that experimental art is that act or thought whose
identity as art must always remain in doubt…The experiment is not to
possess a secret artistry in deep disguise; it is not knowing what to call it
at any time! As soon—and it is usually very soon—as such acts and
thoughts are associated with art and its discourses, it is time to move on to
other possibilities of experimentation. (p. 249)

Kaprow proposes a sequence here that can be tied back to my argument about
how dematerialization can very easily—sometimes unknowingly—become materialized.
Placing “the experiment”, which in Kaprow’s case frequently involved the blurring of art
and life, not as some tricky “secret artistry” but rather as something that may be lacking

7 Kaprow uses the term “experimental art”, which can sometimes be associated with
conceptual art. “Experimental art” though is more frequently contained within conceptual
art and not synonymous with it. In this case, however, it works.
clear signifiers that would define it as art or life, Kaprow notes that those difficult to
decipher actions or moments “very soon” become “associated with art and its discourses”
(p. 249). This has occurred to me when I have been in the middle of some traumatic life
moment: during burials, accidents, the birth of a child. Manifesting itself as mere life a
traumatic moment is not art. But then, in an instance of repose, when contemplation
begins to set in, while we’re waiting for the cemetery workers to bring the dirt, or the
police to show up, or the nurse to indicate that it’s time to “push”, an art emerges in
whatever is happening. Suddenly, I’m in the “movie” of my life, the colors begin to
match, other people’s movements and repetitions become ritualized, almost dance-like,
and then just like that—with that aesthetic awareness settling in—the whole thing
becomes much less interesting. What is happening is not that interesting as art to me
anymore. I have to throw whatever is happening at that moment back into life. This
process is involuntary, happens at different intensities, and happens frequently. This is
remain in doubt” (p. 249).

Conceptual art carries with it this “doubt”, a tension and a provocation to
confusion that frequently begs the question “is that art” or the comment, “that’s not art”.
This is the tension between the dematerialized and the materialized. These two frequently
uttered phrases of incredulity open up a door of permissions that flows in two directions.
On the one hand, the artists can now do “life” and call it art—there are many things out
there that are passing as art, which people don’t think of as such. On the other hand, the
practitioner of life, can now take the mechanisms of his or her life and—regardless of any
extensive training—call what they do art. In this gargantuan—however simple—
permission, the pedagogue is set free from the constraint of keeping their art and pedagogy practices separate.

Before moving along, it may be useful here to look at some examples of conceptual art that I have found particularly striking in order to lay a groundwork for the parallel I will later be pointing to in Pinar’s definition of currere. The Taiwanese-American artist Tehching Hsieh is most famously known for enacting five separate yearlong works of conceptual art wherein he set certain limitations on his body that tested—not only his physical endurance in relation to the materiality of time—but also the notions of what a work of art could be if it was primarily dependant on the passage of time and not necessarily the production of an object. The projects are described and documented in Adrian Heathfield and Tehching Hsieh’s (2009) book Out of now:

1978-1979: Hsieh lived in a small cell-like room, in solitary confinement, committing himself to not “converse, read, write, listen to the radio or watch television” (p. 66) for the entire year.

1980-1981: Hsieh punched a time clock “every hour on the hour for one year” (p.102). The time clock was set up in one room of Hsieh’s apartment and he committed himself to “immediately leave my Time Clock room, each time after I punch the Time clock” (p. 102).

1981-1982: Hsieh stayed outdoors for the entire year committing himself to not “go in to a building, subway, train, car, airplane, ship, cave, tent” (p. 160). He carried with him a sleeping bag.
1983-1984: Hsieh and the performance artist Linda Montano were anchored to each other by an 8-foot rope for an entire year. They committed to not touch each other the whole time they were attached. When they were inside they were always in the same room.

1985-1986: Hsieh committed himself to “not do art, not talk art, not see art, not read art, not go to the art gallery, and art museum for one year” (p. 296). Hsieh stated in his letter of commitment for this project, “I will just go in life” (p. 296).

Heathfield (2009) describes Hsieh’s work as a story, and he calls that story “Impress of time”, noting that “behind this tale are certain themes: how time is lived and felt in the body; how it leaves its marks in material things; how the past lives in the present’ how singular lives and times remain. Let’s say then that Hsieh’s story is all about becoming a sentient witness of time” (p. 11). This understanding of Hsieh’s work situates his one-year performances in a manner that is reminiscent of “sentient” approaches to curricular enactment, that are, currere. For now it is important to demonstrate that currere implies that the curricular process is alive, reflexive, in flux and persistently engaging in its own meta-analysis. Heathfield uses the term “sentient” and Pinar uses the term “aware” to make the same point.

Having studied the documents pertaining to numerous works of conceptual art I’ve concluded that many conceptual artists use the element of time in two ways that point towards this more “sentient” approach to time that Heathfield talks about and, which Pinar (2004) describes in currere as “an intensified engagement with daily life” (p. 37). One of these ways is through the making of durational art and the other is what some
artists have described as “time bombs”. Durational art occupies itself with how time is used in the actual presentation of the work, time-bomb-art is not always blatantly dealing with time, but nevertheless depends on time for the artwork to have its full effect. The time-bomb approach, put simply, initiates a moment but then waits for that moment’s effect to take at a later time.

Unpacking durational art

The artist who works in durational art needs their work’s audience to be in the same space at the same time that they are enacting their work. Of course, there are examples of durational artworks that have not had—or were not primarily intended for—an audience. Artists like Tehching Hsieh are in a select bunch because his work’s lack of documentation makes it very difficult for it to develop the reputation that some art historians such as Howard Becker (1983) say is needed for full participation and recognition in the Art World. Although I don’t wish to use the lack of Art World

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8 I understand the irony in presenting Hsieh’s process as an example of undocumented durational art in light of Adrian Heathfield’s (2009) almost 400-page tome on the mostly durational art of Tehching Hsieh. Heathfield’s project though, has only recently been assembled as a sort of archeological endeavor in collaboration with Hsieh in order to document Hsieh’s durational process. Even then, the documentation of the performances is a select group of in-process photographs, photographs of some of the artifacts involved or leftover after the making of the works, and even thirteen pages that bare only a year designation (e.g. 1989-1990) at the bottom of an otherwise blank page. These thirteen pages are the sole documents for Hsieh’s thirteen-year project where he committed himself to make art but “not show it publicly” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2009, p. 300). Hsieh enacted this work from December 31, 1986 to December 31, 1999. On January 1, 2000, Hsieh released an image that simply stated, “I kept myself alive. I passed the Dec. 31, 1999” (Heathfield and Hsieh, 2009, p. 315), no one knows anything else about this work.

9 My reason for capitalizing the seemingly innocuous phrase “Art World” here is to differentiate between art practices which seemingly fall under the auspices of a world (or expanse) of art activities and the more specific, culturally, economically, and
material presence as a means to circumvent the study of under-witnessed durational art such as Hsieh’s, I hope that by examining the properties of witnessed durational art the complex conversation around artwork documentation can be better elucidated, imagined, and even understood. Although that is a topic for another study, it is important to address it here—if only in passing—in order to not lose sight of the incongruence that comes with the act of defining some of these similar—although maybe not intentionally—art practices.

To understand much durational art we must start with theatre. Like currere, it is helpful to understand durational art by placing it next to something that bares characteristics opposite to its definition. Most artists engaged in durational art are aware of theatre’s implications for their actions, but they are more frequently interested in challenging the conventions of theatre and theatricality, than replicating them. Durational art, much like theatre, tends to be situational and/or ephemeral, however in many works academically situated productions that are part of a market sector known primarily as The Art World. The Art World is a tangible—however amorphous—Western construct, which only sometimes includes art activities made outside of its culturally specific parameters. Even then, the unassimilated, unschooled, non-Western, or “outsider” contributions that are brought into the Art World pass through a colonialist transmutation that position these works of the “other” as subservient to the stylistic, philosophical, and historical mechanisms that have led up to the existence and perpetuation of the current Art World. On one level the Art World is the product of an amalgamated sequence that was manufactured to give the appearance that the history of Western Art is a story of innovation and progress (Elkins, 2002). This “story of art”—beginning with Vasari (1991) and reaching its Twentieth Century crescendo with E.H. Gombrich (1950)—has developed definitive gatekeepers ranging from the academic operations of art history survey courses and MFA programs to the contemporary art market (with its exhibitions and publications) as the principle arbiter of taste, rigor, relevance, and quality in art. Sociologist Howard Becker (1983) differentiates the Art World from the world of art as a product of reputation. Becker notes that the introduction of reputation as the primary gate through which Art World access is obtained came during the Renaissance when the artist shifted from the virtually unremembered occupation of “artisan” to the more heavily lauded and ultimately canonized role of “creator” (p. 353-54).
of durational art, the audience takes on a participatory role in the execution of the work. Through their participation, audiences are then left with the charge of disseminating that particular work’s legacy for perpetuity. If it is important to the artist that the work exist beyond the duration of its execution, relying on the work’s audience for that type of proliferation can be risky. At worst, works can often be forgotten and at times may be so uninteresting (or unmemorable) that they lose the reputation-inertia, which Becker (1983) says drives the Art World. At best, durational works are recalled through the variant memories of those who witnessed the work. Depending on which point of emphasis an audience was drawn to, different aspects of what was witnessed can lead to subjectivities that cause contradictions and sometimes completely fabricated memories about the artwork. In other words, everybody who witnesses a durational work of art remembers it and speaks about it differently.

Something what adds to these differing accounts of a work of durational art is that durational artist usually deal with the theatrical apparatus of the proscenium, or the part of the theatre that is passively watched by its audience (i.e. the stage), by either recontextualizing it or ignoring its parameters. A theatrical space or conventional gallery viewing space sometimes cannot contain works of durational art. They occur in the round (meaning in every part of the space or room), and the audience, even when sitting, tend to not have a designated or even full vantage point of what is happening. This purposeful obfuscation of the whole artwork encourages the potential for differing recollections of the work and even infuses an artwork with a higher potential for poetic interpretation, as well as certain levels of discomfort or annoyance. After all, no one wants to be told that they can’t see the whole thing that they came to see. Finally, durational art differs from
theatre in that many times durational artists forego rehearsing all the components of a work, with the intentions of allowing certain parts of a work to be determined by chance. It may be that the only fixed parameter—like in the work of Tehching Hsieh—is how much time will elapse before the work is over.

Examples of conceptual artworks that are constructed through a durational aesthetic—albeit not always intentionally—include all manner of performance and live art (Goldberg, 1979; Carr, 1993; Schechner, 2002; Bial, 2004; Heathfield, 2004), relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 1998; Bishop, 2006; de Zegher, 2006; Martin, 2007), and works of civic engagement (Lacy, 1995; Purves, 2005; Stimson & Sholette, 2007; Richardson, 2010; Jackson, 2011). I will take the next few pages to describe these three art forms.

It is important to note, as the citations in the previous paragraph evidence, that there actually are fixed works, events, and productions that have been categorized within performance art, relational aesthetics and civic engagement art. However, it is more important—and I believe relevant to my explanations of both conceptual art and its links to currere—to not fix the definition of these terms but rather to give examples of works that fall somewhere in or around their critical and historical conversations. This semi-evasive manner of situating these art modes of operation, hopefully serves to clarify what these terms mean by broadening what is possible, rather then fixing a trivial formal definition of what they are.
Unpacking performance art

There is an untitled performance work of 1952 arranged by John Cage that is considered to be the first piece of a type of performance art called Happenings (Sontag, 1961). Happenings, which were popularized in the 1960s by artists such as Alan Kaprow, Jackson MacLow, and Al Hansen\(^{10}\), were distinguished by their multimodality/interdisciplinarity; their integration of the audience as part of the event; and their ability to subvert the conventions of theatre (namely acting and narrative dependency) while still coming off as something to be experienced live. Cage’s supposed first happening was conducted at the progressive Black Mountain College, in the school’s dining hall. The painter Robert Rauschenberg, poets Charles Olsen and H.C. Richards, pianist David Tudor, and the dancer Merce Cunningham all carried out Cage’s instructions to perform various activities simultaneously as if they were performing in a multi-ring circus. The audience sat in the center of the space—having to choose what to watch—as all of this happened around them. Unbeknownst to the audience, they also took part in the performance. Contributing with their chatter, their confusion, and—through a slight gesture of indifference—the use of a Styrofoam cup that had been placed on each one of their seats; a cup that eventually would be filled with coffee by performers in roller skates even though some of the audience had by that time used those cups as ashtrays.

\(^{10}\) It might be useful to the reader to note that all three of these artists were students of John Cage’s at the New School for Social Research in the mid to late fifties. There is an account of these classes in Joseph Jacob’s (1999) essay *Crashing New York A La John Cage*, however Alan Kaprow later disavowed the importance of these courses (although not of Cage) to the development of the eventual Happenings, which he is widely credited with having initiated.
There are varying accounts of Cage’s “happening” captured in the biographies of each of the participants. In Martin Duberman’s (1972) comprehensive history of the experimental college, he captures the fickleness of this moment’s Art World endurance by juxtaposing the various recollections of that evening’s unfolding, including that of one of the participants, Merce Cunningham. When Duberman asked Cunningham about the philosophical impetus for this multifaceted work, Cunningham responded, “I think [it]…is in respect to the way life itself is all these separate things going on at the same time. And contemporary society is so extraordinarily complex that way” (p. 357). Every person’s story that is recounted in Duberman’s tome is different. No one remembered the Cage performance in the same way. What Duberman presents is the effect of time on a work that was essentially about the time (the hour or so) that it lasted. What this performance—with its particularly ephemeral materiality—lends to our investigation about conceptual art, currere, and their potential for an emancipatory pedagogy is this idea of the situational experience, response, and how memory or lack of memory play out in the “life” of a particular moment of learning or making.

In Cage’s piece we see both uses of time come to bear on our understanding of the work and on our understanding of our understanding. On the one hand, the length of the work and its lack of documentation acknowledge durational practice, which I defined above. On the other hand, the trickling effect that the work has had in the fifty plus years since its enactment is in line with the time-bomb artwork described below, which essentially reinvigorates the artwork over time in the minds of those who witnessed it firsthand, and—thanks to Duberman’s text—in the imagination of those of us who didn’t.
This element of mis-memory, which the lack of immediate documentation and the passing of time seems to produce is important to underline here since John Cage’s 1952 “happening” wasn’t—in fact—the first multi-centric work. The origin myth of Cage’s first “happening” has been ratified, no doubt in part because of Cage’s pedagogical connection with many of the eventual “Happening” artists. The fame of this particular work is important, even if it wasn’t actually the first work of its kind because retroactively Cage’s work helps us to recognize artworks that were being made at a time, and in an environment that was much less friendly to this type of presentation.

Predecessors to Cage’s multi-ring, multi-sensory performance date as far back as 1909 and it is important that they are examined in more detail since—not unlike my introduction to art and later to art education—the lack of a formalized language for this type of work proved to be a fructiferous ground for innovation and interdisciplinary explorations. Here I’ll talk a little bit about an obscure contributor to the Futurist cohort, but in the next chapter I will describe in further detail the contributions of Latin American conceptual practitioners who broke ground in the midst of their semi-ignorance to what was the “true” or regulated form of their particular conceptual discourse and practice.

The dancer Valentine de Saint Point, one of the few documented (although barely) female Futurists11 was making works that seem to initiate two of the things

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11 Futurism was a somewhat flamboyant political movement, which began in Paris in the early 1900’s and traveled to Italy (and in the case of de St. Point, New York). Its manifestation included artists and writers who used performance as a means to “go out into the street, launch assaults from theatres and introduce the fisticuff into the artistic battle” (cited in Goldberg, 1979, p. 16). Most historians and theorists of performance art,
Cage’s work proposes for performance art in general and possibly for curriculum practice through currere. The first is the nuances that surround the use of time as a material (how it’s manipulated and how it affects a work) and the second are the ideas of ownership, craft, and worth or value in a work of art.

de Saint Point’s work received mixed reviews at the time of its presentation. Lacking the term “performance art”, her works were labeled “dance” and therefore were often criticized for not really being dance. This criticism, of course, needs to be understood in the context of the audience for which de Saint Point was performing. It needs to be clearly distinguished that de Saint Point’s performances—which happened to be one of the few Futurists’ works seen in the United States—were being performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York and not in the dining hall of a progressive college. Equally interesting is that, just like the Cage performance, there seems to be no consensus on what these performances actually looked like. The lack of consensus comes, not so much from the lack of photo documentation, but rather because of the phenomenon I described which is interlaced with works of durational performance. What I’m talking about is the subjective viewpoints that are created when an audience is looking at something that can’t all be looked at in one viewing or from a single vantage point. And so it was with de St. Point’s work, where different newspaper reviewers focused their descriptions on different parts of her dances unable to really describe them as a whole. Music critics focused on the music, dance critics on the dance, and still others on the various theatrics of the performances.

such as Goldberg, trace performance art—such as the work Cage initiated—to this turn of the century, interdisciplinary, art, social, and political movement.
Performance theorist Leslie Satin (1990) took a look at the varying written reviews surrounding de St. Point’s New York performance of 1917 and made some comparisons. Satin points out the fact that “time”, in its situationality, was affecting how de Saint Point’s work was being perceived and remembered by those who witnessed it. Satin describes that de Saint Point purposefully put forth discontinuity and variety in her displays, a practice that is now a mainstay in much contemporary performance, which creates the differentiating, chance-laden, occurrences that usually lead to the audience encountering the work through both, the durational aesthetic filter and the time bomb effect. We can begin to see how performance works such as de St. Point’s and Cage’s can effect a pedagogical/curricular endeavor by remembering that the durational aesthetic filter causes a work to be remembered and interpreted differently by all its observers and that the time-bomb-art effect opens up the opportunity for the creation of new knowledge and new connections at a later moment removed from the witnessing or recollection of the performance.

Before leaving performance art, it may be worthy to point out that Satin recalls how de Saint Point, interested in some of the same cross-disciplinary, multimodal, and multi-sensory concerns of The Symbolist (e.g. Mallarmé; Poe), created works that were:

An amalgam of styles and approaches which included generous borrowing from the basics of Symbolism: depersonalization of the performer, interrelationship of the senses, emphasis on mystery and atmosphere, interest in geometric symbols and light and shadow, and emptying out of the performance space. (p. 1)
Essentially performing an exercise which is in line with the shift from a more Cartesian bifurcated mode of thinking and doing to—what Nietzsche, who is identified by some as a Symbolist philosopher (van den Braembussche, 2009)—called Perspectivism, (Nietzsche, 2001) a precursor philosophy to pluralism that allows for multiple vantage points or “perspectives” and interpretations of a singular phenomenon. de St. Point opens up an arena of visuality through her multi-perspectival performances that could only be received through impressions, a term that by its very definition—of being first or immediate—is indicative of its relationship with time.

Satin calls her own piecing together of the newspaper reviews concerning de Saint Point’s Opera House performance an “impression” (p. 6) due largely to the discord reflected in the multiple accounts by some of the work’s audience. She notes that de Saint Point’s performances—besides being movement based— included music, costumes, poetry, projections of mathematical equations on large cloth screens, and other color projections. Some of the music that de Saint Point used in her performances—such as Debussy and Satie—eventually became very important to John Cage’s development as an experimental composer and performer, essentially teaching Cage how to break out of certain traditional structures of musical composition, performance, and audience expectation.

Satin’s description of de St. Point’s work may seem irrelevant to my discussion of time in regards to performance, but it is important to include the retelling here for two reasons. The first is that Satin herself acknowledges that the presentation of her de St. Point research came to her as an “impression”. Satin calls it an “impression” because she could not get a clear picture of how people were reacting to de St. Point’s work in the
early twentieth century, mainly because de St. Point’s audiences memories of what they had witnessed were so subjective. The second reason for including this descriptor of de St. Point’s work is because attempting to conjure up an image in the reader’s mind further enacts my idea that performance works such as de St. Point and Cage’s can still have an effect on someone, regardless of whether or not that person actually witnesses those performances live. The ability to experience the effects of a work of art without having to see it—by merely examining the artist’s mode of operation—is one of the primary things that the study of conceptual art lends to a curricular practice. From the example of John Cage’s first “official” happening, back to Valentine de Saint Point’s, obviously pioneering multilayered work, a broader definition of performance emerges and that definition is no longer as dependent on the performance work’s duration. The work begins to move into the realm of the time-bomb-work of art, which allows for interpretations and creative responses to a work of art that has been experienced either through a retelling, reenactment, photograph, video, or even a personal memory; even an inaccurate memory.

Unpacking the time-bomb

Durational art is one way that the materiality of time comes into play in conceptual art. As I have just shown, performance art is its principle arbiter. I’ve alluded a number of times to a second manner in which the materiality of time comes into play in conceptual art, and this is tied in many ways to the ideas I put forth at the end of the Unpacking bricolage section, where I cite Levi-Strauss’s proposal of the “active participant”. The active participant plays a pivotal role in the enactment of the time-bomb use time’s materiality in conceptual art practices.
Alberto Aguilar (2010), who I mentioned in the introduction, was the first person I heard use the phrase, “time bombs” (p. 24) in relation to learning. The “time-bomb” MO—for both the conceptual artists and pedagogue—is predicated on the understanding that the viewer of an artwork or a student may have a delayed sense-making moment in relation to an initial encounter with something that is newly presented to them. “In time…[the concepts, stories] might resurface and make sense” (Aguilar, 2010, p. 26).

The “time-bomb” is an old idea, tracing its lineage in conceptual art to one of the form’s most pivotal figures, Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp was famous for not giving his works literal meanings or—for that matter—clear aesthetic, moral, or metaphorical inroads for interpretation. Duchamp’s work—to this day—is difficult because he troubled the history, traditions, and academics of art (his and others) by enacting what Thomas McEvilley (2005) called, “anti-art” (p. 16), meaning art-like-gestures that were both “opposed to” and “instead of” art. Duchamp left the advancement of his works’ meaning to the audience, his “active participants”. His lack of specificity, presented an opportunity for the audience to “complete” the work—conceptually, that is—and hence become co-creators of the artwork and its meaning. This exchange—where an individual makes the meaning in one of Duchamp’s conceptual works—puts that individual audience member in a relatively primary position. In some way, Duchamp cedes control away from himself to someone—frequently a stranger across geography, language, and most curiously, time—away from himself. Since conceptual works are a priori concerned with the ideas in, behind, and in initiation of the work, and since much of the work around the “idea” is passed along to others, the audience member becomes an integral part of the artwork, maybe even “becoming” the artwork itself. That is, in this
exchange—because of the nature of the transactions—the art object itself becomes secondary to the movement of ideas, speculations, and philosophies surrounding the experience with the object. The artwork is not the object but the experience of being with or viewing the object. This becomes the moment of reversal that I proposed when talking about Levi-Strauss’s (1966) idea of a bricoleur constructing “a material object which is also an object of knowledge” (p. 22) as a moment when the active participant constructs an object of knowledge, which is also a material object.

John Cage inspired by Duchamp also made—what could be considered—time-bomb art works. Unlike Duchamp though, Cage was a very generous pedagogue who attempted to create bridges of understanding\(^{12}\) between his sometimes excruciatingly unentertaining works and the audiences who encountered them. Cage was known for holding question and answer sessions after experimental concerts that challenged his audiences’ expectations; he was approachable, giving hundreds of interviews during his lifetime; he held residencies at colleges all over the world, and he published many of his writings. Judging by the vast library of Cage-penned books in circulation, if John Cage wrote it, it was published. John Cage was a philosopher who rejoiced in the sharing of his philosophical ruminations. Although Cage’s motivation for being so forthright with his “pedagogy” does beg to be examined—perhaps through a psychoanalytic investigation that looks at the desires which motivate most teachers to be equally “generous”—it is

\(^{12}\) Here I want to highlight that what I mean by “understanding” is not the same as explication. I’ve yet to come across a moment where Cage explains what he is doing or what he means by what he did. Cage, however, left a parallel oeuvre of written works that—again, don’t explicate—but rather expand each individual reader’s understanding of how they might interpret the works of John Cage. Cage’s written and spoken work, although revelatory, is frequently meant to stand on its own as literary work.
through Cage’s prolific openness that we can peer into Cage’s MO and even speculate about Duchamp’s MO, particularly in regards to some of their pedagogy’s similarities with currere’s implications towards slowness, do-over and rehash sensibility, and encouragement towards simultaneously working towards the future while being aware of the present.

What—in Duchamp’s thinking—is particularly advantageous for my discussion about currere, is something that Cage put forth using the same observer-completes-the-work philosophy of the time-bomb and active participant. Cage (1991), talking about the music of Charles Ives in relation to the work of Duchamp, describes certain parts of a musical piece as “mud”. Cage said this mud is the part of a creative work that is “mysterious”, even though it is also an accessible part of the work. The mud, which Cage refers to as “fertile” is at once a place where the audience gets stuck and yet grows from. Cage put it this way, “the mud…makes it mysterious at the same time it makes something you can clearly experience, though what you experience you’re not sure of…you have to finish the experience in your own way” (p. 40). The “mud” is a place of retardation, but also something that can be touched and “clearly experience[d]” even if what is being experienced cannot be deciphered at that precise moment.

The same is the case with the time-bomb. The presence of the time-bomb is real and present (imagine the ticking time-bomb popularized in countless action films), but it is clearly and inextricably unique because its detonation is not immediate. This delay in detonation or progression of both the time-bomb and the mud metaphors have a drawback for educators who solely concentrate on student achievement, as well as artists who use their artworks strictly to communicate or express themselves. Insomuch as the
time-bomb and the mud have the potential to bring about significant change wherever they are placed, there is always the possibility that—by their very nature—the time bomb can be a dud and the mud can be stultifying and infertile. That is, whether one is enacting an artistic or a pedagogical project, working through the time-bomb or the mud metaphor doesn’t always guarantee “detonation” or “growth”. This “failure”—although unattractive to bureaucrats and those whom they pressure—has a particular lure with practitioners of currere and pedagogy as contemporary art practice since—it appears that the artist as researcher tends to have a higher tolerance for this type of slowness and/or apparent uselessness.

I have personally experienced the failure of the time-bomb and the infertility of the “mud” in my teaching and in my art practice. Occasionally as a teacher I take a risk, I may present something that is purposefully difficult. It could be a reading or a directive, which even I have trouble with. I understand this as a vulnerable position that can go in any number of unpredictable ways. Often times, it works perfectly; meaning the students take whatever it is that I am challenging them with and through their own wit, ingenuity, and courage bring forth a tremendous amount of newness and vitality from this once cumbersome “thing” that I’ve introduced to the class. What happens in the classroom doesn’t happen according to what I had envisioned, I am genuinely surprised by what happens. I also receive a teaching from this type of open experience. Other times though, the whole enterprise fizzles. I don’t see the students engaged and frequently—when things are going like this—I become equally uninterested. There is one other way that things play out in the classroom. Sometimes the class is moving along in the manner of the second situation I described, the fizzle; but later I find out—through a comment
someone makes or an email someone sends—that the very moment which I thought was a
dud, was actually a transformative moment for someone in the class. That is why I
frequently accept those moments that appear to be disproportionately ineffective to be
potential moments where the time-bomb is not going off or the mud will not yield fruit
under my expectant eye. For me this outcome is an equally legitimate one, true to the
time-bomb’s “muddy” capacity. I’ll take my cue for this attitude towards failure from
Duchamp, since it might even be inferred from his usual tone, that he may have even
enjoyed this aspect of failure—failure which gets resolved away from the desperate
expectations of an artist or teacher that has worked “so hard” to make things come out
“just right”.

At the risk of getting the reader, “stuck” in this part of the introductory chapter, I
would like to furthermore consider Cage’s designation of “mystery” as an inherent
coincident to the process of getting your audience stuck in the “mud,” but through the
lens of how it can be applied to oneself. In other words, the time-bomb gives the
implication that it is “planted” by one (say the teacher) for the benefit of another (say the
student). Looking at literary critic Gregory Ulmer’s idea of mystory—if only in passing—
presents the pedagogical implications and parallels I’m arguing between conceptual art
and curriculum practice for self-application.

Ulmer (1987) points to the unpredictable—however dependable—future, explaining

A mystery is not a prediction, description, prescription, or proscription,
but a self-exhortation…the mysterical derives from those parts of writers’
journals in which unexecuted projects are described…such projects are
assignments given to the future as a class and teach us something about
the close relationship between theory and pedagogy. (p. 339-40)

What is it that the mystery teaches us about the “relationship between theory and
pedagogy”? Well, reading just a bit further, Ulmer characterizes *mystery* in a way that
corresponds with my premise in this unpacking, stating that “in the classroom it is never a
question, really, of what I mean, but this post-meaning: meaning not as denotation but as
detonation, *time bomb* [emphasis mine]” (Ulmer, 1987, p. 340)13. And here Ulmer
introduces the learning of the perpetrator of the “time-bomb”, “mud”, “currere”,
“bricolage” or pedagogy as conceptual art practice. Ulmer proposes that what the author
or creative practitioner does is give him or herself assignments into the future. As if one
were to keep some sort of journal, lose it, and then find it years later after forgetting what
the original context of most of the journal entries were. Recontextualized by the passage
of time and marred by the unreliability of memories and intentions, the author becomes
reengaged in his or her old production particularly because they are seeing them without
the heavy context of “why” those images or writings were put there in the first place. It is
almost as if the author, when finding his or her old notebooks, has found one belonging to
a stranger. The American painter Brice Marden talks about this process a little bit in a
1977 documentary about his studio practice (Howard and Haines, 1977). Flipping

13 Important to note here is that I had formulated my idea of the time-bomb-pedagogy
before encountering it in Ulmer’s literary criticism. Although I was familiar and
interested in Ulmer’s (1985) work around Derrida’s concept of grammatology
(deconstruction as a writing process), it was Ulmer’s idea of denotation (meaning telling
or teaching) vs. detonation (implying a private delayed—however imminent—telling or
contracting that is sometimes self initiated) that solidified what I meant by the time-bomb
for me.
through his sketchbook—which is really more like a scrapbook—he comments that he then carries this collection of pictures, drawings, movie-tickets, and found scraps, onto the subway and simply looks through it, occasionally becoming inspired to make a new work that doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with his original intention for pasting that picture or writing that phrase into his notebook. That scrapbook becomes a time-bomb for the self.

This idea of the time-bomb, whether it is set for others or for oneself, is not unlike Marshall McLuhan’s “information rubbing” or Thomas Brockelman’s simultaneous collage representation/antirepresentationism that I mention in the civic engagement art section below. In all three examples (time-bomb, rubbing, and collage), only certain components are known. We can call those known components, “sources” since they act as beginnings, or moments from which all the meaning is constructed. In the pedagogical situation, the sources are often seen as what the teacher or facilitator brings to the rest of the students. It could be a video, a picture, a lesson, a question, or a directive. Either way, what happens when the sources or components are collaged and then presented is unexpected. With time-bombs though, both Aguilar and Ulmer seem to imply that the detonation moment occurs when the viewer is no longer in front of the source (i.e. the collage, the beginning, the directive, the question, the lesson). The detonation occurs when the audience member is reengaged in everyday life. Everyday life triggers the time-bomb.
Unpacking relational aesthetics

Now we are sliding into some more contentious areas. The concept of everyday life in the making of conceptual artworks is not contentious per se since it is now wholly permissible to celebrate the quotidian, banal, intricate, under-observed, and trivial as artistic modes of operation. Where it does start to get contentious is when that “look” into everyday life involves people. Part of this has to do with the use of time as a material, as I’ve described in the *Unpacking durational art* and *Unpacking the time-bomb* sections of this chapter, but most of it has to do with some questions that have so far gone unexamined in my text. These questions—although seemingly optional in the creation of art—are central to every pedagogical endeavor, regardless of where the project lay on the theory/practice continuum. These questions are those pertaining to ethics and social responsibility.

In conceptual art practice we can see two forms that are finding kinship with these pedagogical concerns demonstrating that these concerns are not strictly pedagogical and possibly can transform our understanding of pedagogy with their alternative approaches to ethics, education, and civic engagement. Relational aesthetics, a now highly-formalized cohort of art practices and its lesser known sibling civic-engagement art are these two forms of making that have taken the ephemeral and interdisciplinary permissions gathered from conceptual art, infused them with participatory strategies and social consciousness, and attempted to not only reflect everyday life, but also be everyday life *as* art work.
According to art theorist Stewart Martin (2007) “relational aesthetics” is the closest thing to a new -ism in contemporary art practice. Martin’s loaded pronouncement is counter-intuitive considering the catalogued multicultural and multimedia hodge-podge of artists that randomly fills up the closing chapters of most current art history survey books (Stokstad, 2010; Schneider-Adams, 2010). In other words, Martin’s comment can be taken seriously because to some extent it highlights the anomaly that the existence of any solidified—even canonized—art movement in contemporary art proposes.

To demonstrate the various incarnations of just a handful of practitioners officially designated as relational aesthetes, allow me to cite at length here a passage found in what could be considered the bible or handbook of relational aesthetics; Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) collection of essays titled after the movement itself:

Rirkrit Tiravanija organises (sic) a dinner in a collector’s home, and leaves him all the ingredients required to make a Thaï soup. Phillippe Parreno invites a few people to pursue their favourite (sic) hobbies on May Day, on a factory assembly line. Vanessa Beecroft dresses some twenty women in the same way, complete with a red wig, and the visitor merely gets a glimpse of them through the doorway. Maurizio Cattelan feeds rats on “Bel paese” cheese and sells them as multiples, or exhibits recently robbed safes. In Copenhagen Square, Jes Brinch and Henrik Plenge Jacobson install an upturned bus that causes a rival riot in the city. Christine Hill works as a check-out assistant in a supermarket, organises (sic) a weekly gym workshop in a gallery. Carsten Höller recreates the chemical formula of molecules secreted by the human brain when in love, builds an
inflatable plastic yacht, and breeds chaffinches with the aim of teaching them a new song. Noritoshi Hirakawa puts a small ad in a newspaper to find a girl to take part in his show. Pierre Huyghe summons people to a casting session, makes a TV transmitter available to the public, and puts a photograph of labourers (sic) at work on view just a few yards from the building site. (pp. 7-8)

The concept of relational aesthetics comes from the French curator, and author of the above list, Nicolás Bourriaud (2002), who in the early 1990’s formally classified the works of a handful of disparate artists by defining some of their practices as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private [original emphasis] symbolic space” (p. 14). Bourriaud published seven essays concerning the group in magazines and exhibition catalogues, eventually bringing those essays together into a single volume, *Relational aesthetics* (2002).

*Relational aesthetics* included a glossary, a pedagogical gesture that becomes very telling in light of Martin’s comment about relational aesthetics being the closest thing to a new –ism in recent art. The institutionalization of relational aesthetics comes to the fore, since *Relational aesthetics* (the academic book) partitions a very specific type of art-making and formalizes it to the point where relational aesthetics as a practice can now be imitated, taught from, and even resisted. In other words, Bourriaud’s academic-style book solidifies the parameters of a highly subjective aesthetic (due not only to its subjectivity but also to its preoccupation with the “subject”) positioning it in a manner that gives the movement or method of art-working authority. This authority can then be
embraced and followed or found faulty and rebelled against, either way both reactions are consistent with the manner in which previous art movements (e.g. impressionism, cubism, abstract expressionism) have become academic and subsequently reacted to.

Art critic Dave Hickey (1997) tells an admonishing story in his essay Heresy of the zone defense, where he points to the academization of the Abstract Expressionist gesture—particularly Jackson Pollock’s drip—and his art professors insistence that this was now the way to paint. Hickey states that at the time his teachers would tell him, “it’s bad not to drip…it means you got no soul” (p. 157). Relational aesthetics dangerously teeters at the edge of this same fate.

Despite Martin’s recognition of relational aesthetics as a new –ism, this type of art didn’t come out of nowhere. As I hinted above, even Bourriaud’s label and book didn’t induce it. Liam Gillick, one of the artists captured under Bourriaud’s relational-aesthetics-umbrella made a point of refuting the label, while simultaneously collaborating and exhibiting with many of the artists that Bourriaud had placed on his roster. The reason Gillick and other artists like him shun the label is precisely because many of them had been working in this way for years before Bourriaud began writing about them and also because of the inherent limitations a particular definition might have over a given artist’s process. Many of the relational aesthetics’ artists—predominately from Europe—had been inspired by the work of the Situationist, Dada, and performance art. Relational aesthetics’ varied roots allow the political face of this type of work to emerge. This is an important point to bring up here, since—in chapter three—I will be discussing a difference that exists in conceptual artworks that derived from an outwardly political reaction to things like governments, war, and other social conditions versus the
conceptual art that—may or may not have been overtly political—but was nevertheless a reaction to a more formal concern.

Unlike performance art, which didn’t have such an immediate singular text such as Bourriaud’s to capture its history, as well as suggest its do’s and don’ts, relational aesthetics has developed some pretty staunch critics. Among them, the aforementioned Stewart Martin and other artists who may be reacting to the formalization of a method of working which inherently calls for spontaneity, chance occurrences, and subjectivity. Martin’s critique though is not so much about artistic integrity, hinting inconsistencies in the practice of relational aesthetics that have more to do with plain old human integrity.

In his essay *A critique of relational aesthetics*, Martin (2007) proposes that the artists’ projects championed by Bourriaud, “can be read as a naïve mimesis of aestheticization of novel forms of capitalist exploitation” (p. 371), which I think is reflected—not just in the included artists’ works—but also in Bourriaud’s seemingly innocuous action of publishing the book *Relational aesthetics*. In other words, the act of publishing *Relational Aesthetics* is not neutral, reiterating the “aestheticization” that Martin decries. His criticism suggests that there has been a glazing over—of what he calls the critique, “of the political economy of social exchange that is implicitly proposed by Relational Aesthetics…a consideration of how relational art produces a social exchange that disengages from capitalist exchange, and…how the form of relational art relates to or opposes the commodity form or the value form” (p. 371).

At the conclusion of Bourriaud’s *Relational aesthetics* he includes a glossary of terms. In the glossary, Bourriaud (1998) describes relational aesthetics as an “aesthetic
theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt” (p. 112). In contrast, the artist Pablo Helguera calls out relational aesthetics’ colonialist trappings, pointing to the lack of consideration of the nuances of otherness in those “inter-human relations”. With an emperor-has-no-clothes panache, in the tongue-in-cheek glossary that concludes *The Pablo Helguera Manual of contemporary art style* (2007), Helguera calls relational aesthetics “a philosophical trend…which justified the tendency of artists and curators to travel to exotic locations and use local communities as the source of their work” (p. 100). Ouch!

In my own personal experience, I have seen evidence of both Martin’s claims and Helguera’s allusion to the “trend’s” disproportionately privileged position of power. In art discourses ranging from the academy (see Becker, 1999)14 to the well-funded international art scene (see Morin and Farmer, 2000 & 2010) I have seen how artists—with good intentions—find it hard to either separate life from art or bring them together in manner which can put either one’s integrity into question. Martin, and even Helguera’s critiques, are made obvious and even valid by the complexity of this dichotomy; making many of the artists’ works in *Relational aesthetics*—including Bourriaud’s act of documenting the work—suspect simply because that documentation exist. If documentation—such as a photograph or a book—potentially commodifies a relational experience, then it stands to reason that a Marxist critique, such as Martins, would apply.

14 The experimental course that Carol Becker (1999) writes about in the essay *The art of crossing the street* is one that I actually took part in while an undergraduate student at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. While writing this dissertation I ran into one of the teachers of that course who was speaking wonderfully about how many of that classes students are currently engaged in social activism and civic reform in one way or another.
By comparison, the conversation concerning the pluses and minuses in relational aesthetics—has become more rich—since the publication of Bourriauad’s book because it inadvertently may have brought criticisms—such as Martin’s—to bear on this type of art.

It may appear that I am introducing the relational aesthetics in such a negative light as to render its permissions unusable. I’m not. Actually I wanted to lay down the complexities of something like relational aesthetics in order to propose the parallels to the ethical complexities of pedagogy. This is important because even I think it is a difficult thing to promote the use of art modes of operation—traditionally heavy with object making and marketing—in order to gain permissions for our pedagogical ways of being. But something as ethically complex as relational aesthetics actually pairs itself well with pedagogical concerns looking to evolve as a creative material.

Something very positive has happened since Bourriaud’s initial introduction of the relational aesthetic form. What has occurred is the passage of time, which has allowed for a sort of generic definition of relational aesthetics to emerge. Students and artists are subscribing to the spirit of the law not the letter, and they are making relational works that are inspired by their (mis)understandings of what the form actually is, at least according to Bourriaud. An exhibition of many of the artists in Bourriaud’s canon took place at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (2008). The show theanyspacewhatever, admittedly a curatorial project of a highly esteemed Art World “banking warehouse”

15 Helguera’s use of the term “banking warehouse” is a coy, albeit real, allusion to the place large art museums of high reputation play in the market maneuvering of the Art World “haves”. Helguera positions himself on the side of the presumed reader of his text, an outsider who struggles to take his or her art from the strata of making one’s work for personal reasons to making one’s work as members of this exclusive nebulous club.
(Helguera, 2007, p. 98), offers us a way to make relational aesthetics useful despite its initial contextual and ethical troubles. Inadvertently—I assume—the organizers of the exhibition, placed the potentially troubling aspects of this type of work on such an egregiously commercial stage, and by doing so, they have—in a way—nullified its potential offensiveness. In other words, what the exhibit at the Guggenheim does is make relational aesthetics a ghost, or a myth, essentially allowing for the idea of relational aesthetics to move beyond Bourriaud’s book. In the same way that Goldie and Schellekens (2007) talk about a little “c” and a big “C” conceptual art, maybe relational aesthetics can be divided in this manner. Relational Aesthetics with a big “R” and “A” becomes the work that has been bracketed by the cannon—sentenced to perpetuity as a cartoon of itself—and relational aesthetics with a little “r” and “a” is all the relational art made post the “movements”’ solidification. Perhaps the future cue for practitioners wanting to creatively respond to what has been captured in Bourriaud’s Relational aesthetics is to take their prompt from this second-hand definition written by some unidentified employee of the Guggenheim curatorial staff:

Though each artist is recognized for his or her own practice, they are linked by a mutual rethinking of the early modernist impulse to conflate art and life. Rather than deploy representational strategies, they privilege experiential, situation-based work over discrete aesthetic objects. The exhibition model—in essence, a spatial and durational event—has become, for these artists, a creative medium in and of itself.

(Guggenheim.org, 2008, ¶ 2)
All the criticisms of relational aesthetics’ hypocritical patina and its insensitive underbelly aside, the motivations, proposals, and products birthed from this artistic practice have an attractive sheen—and a beating heart—to them. These works are compelling to many—if not for what they actually are—then for the utopian vision they conjure up through their mythical status. This mythical status is not unlike the aura that proceeds from big “C” conceptual art due primarily to its situationality and consequent ephemerality. As with performance art and the art of civic engagement, the nature of the work creates its dissemination and mythical build-up through essentialist descriptions that are dependent on the fickle and contradictory memories of the handful of people who experienced the works in actuality. This is followed by all of us who pass on the myths, myths that are dependent on how good our collective story-telling skills are or how many field trips we dare to initiate.

Unpacking civic engagement art

Civic engagement art is a tricky label because in many ways the creative works that I would put in this category are merely works that have been marginalized by big “R” relational aesthetics. To avoid re-treading the relational aesthetics road unnecessarily, reinstating what has been so efficiently—albeit inadvertently—dismantled by the existence of Bourriaud’s book and the Guggenheim’s commodification of Relational Aesthetics, I want to point to creative practices that often fall under the auspices of sociology. Sociological experiments, if examined as performance ethnography (Denzin, 2003), can be brought closer to the realms of art and then pedagogy as contemporary art practice.
At this moment it is important to reintroduce Claude Levi-Strauss’s bricoleur since he designated as “mythical” the mode of operation, which leads to my next example. Levi-Strauss aligned mythical thinking with the kind of intelligence he designated for the “savage” which he was trying to put on par with the Western “engineer” who in turn works through the modern scientific method. Remember that Levi-Strauss proposed that the engineer would solve a particular problem through a certain calculation that involved attaining the correct materials for the solution and all sorts of planning. In contrast, Levi-Strauss proposed that the “savage” or bricoleur worked from an ad-hoc point, with whatever materials were at hand, and from a more “mythic” or a priori base of knowledge. It is also important to remember that Levi-Strauss was not positioning one before the other as Janine Mileaf (n.d.) has so succinctly put it, “They [mythic and modern scientific] are two autonomous ways of thinking, rather than two stages in an evolution of thought” (¶ 1). The mythic, in this next example is related to something of the ghost of relational aesthetics, which I mention in the previous section, but only insofar as this practitioner goes out of his way to make himself as invisible as possible while creating his civic engagement bricolage.

In 1990 Dwight Conquergood, a sociologist and performance studies theorist at Northwestern University released a film he co-produced and directed called Heart broken in half. The movie documented his physical move into a working class, low-income apartment building in Chicago’s Albany Park neighborhood. At the time, Conquergood (1990) described this neighborhood on the north side of the city as “a mosaic of nationalities that is overlaid with another map of gang nations” (Heart broken in half). Conquergood’s careful description of Albany Park’s heterogeneous population makeup is
useful to my positioning of civic engagement art because he presents a sociological difference ("nationalities and gang nations") as bricolage ("a mosaic overlaid by a map"). The metaphor Conquergood uses here—a visual metaphor—to describe Albany Park’s complex demographic positions his sociological study outside of the usual signifier-reliant documentary devices, which typically aim to direct the emotions of the viewer towards empathy with the film’s subject(s) or agendas. Conquergood demonstrates the use of a collage sensibility in his filmmaking style by limiting his own position within and around what he is presenting. In other words, Conquergood never really tells the viewer how to “read” what he is “documenting”, he merely presents it. Evidence of Conquergood’s attempt at neutrality in the presentation of his subjects is captured in sequences of the film where things are happening (e.g. fights, vandalism, confessions of crimes to Conquergood) and the filmmakers behind the camera inaction becomes glaringly palpable. Through the video’s voiceover and editing there is a deliberate attempt to suggest to the viewer that the viewer is in charge of interpreting what is being presented. This enabling of the viewer to create their own judgments, finds no better evidence than in the comments made by You Tube users under the film’s internet posting. It isn’t Conquergood’s fellow sociologists who are leaving their “thumbs-ups” and favorable comments on the online forums; it’s mostly members of the communities presented in the film—including (I assume) gang members—who are posting their positive reactions to Heart broken in half.

It is Conquergood’s (2004) favoring of performance learning\(^\text{16}\) over what he

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\(^{16}\) Conquergood positioned performance learning as alternative learning under Foucault’s (1980) concept of “subjugated knowledges” (p. 81). Foucault states that, “subjugated knowledges are thus those blocs of historical knowledge which were present but
called “knowledge that is anchored in paradigm and secured in print” (p. 370), that foregrounds Conquergood’s bricoleur sensibility, namely through performance theory and into his ethnographic process. The bricoleur sensibility—much like many of the terms introduced in this opening section—can be unpacked in multiple ways. When I present the idea, I’m usually referring to a mere juxtaposition that generates something new. Even though collage has a long aesthetic tradition, I’m not insinuating that the bricoleur’s sensibility has any aesthetic intentions, although it might. And although aesthetic sensibilities, usually attributed to artisans, carry a latent requirement towards rigor and/or labor I’m not pointing to the bricoleur’s sensibility’s validity in relation to that tradition either. In fact, I subscribe to the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn’s (2006) idea that collage, because of its minimal requirements and sometimes-aloof everydayness, can be perceived as “easy…non-professional, something dilettante, something non-serious, something suspicious” (¶ 29). I take Hirschhorn’s words in tandem with Marshal McLuhan’s (1963) generative pronouncement that “man in the electronic age has no possible environment except the globe and no possible occupation except information-gathering. By simply moving information and brushing information against information, any medium whatever creates vast wealth (italics mine)” (p. 44).

Even though Hirschhorn is speaking about the collage object and how it is perceived and McLuhan’s is talking about the action of bricolage, their statements position the bricoleur’s sensibility as a democratic operation, which doesn’t require any aesthetic
disguised within the body of the functionalist and systematising (sic) theory…I believe that by subjugated knowledges one should understand something else, something which in a sense is altogether different…a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy” (p. 82).
skills other than the ones required to decipher what is being juxtaposed, or “brushed up” against one another.

In the case of Conquergood’s film, the bricolage\textsuperscript{17} wasn’t just occurring on screen, but also through the performance of viewing the film. True to Levi-Strauss’s proposal, I, the viewer, was an “active participant” in performing the moment of bricolage, creating “vast wealth” out of what I was seeing. My bricolage of meanings—created during the viewing of the film—adds one more layer of complexity to my definition of what it means to enact bricolage. Conquergood’s purposeful ambivalence when it came to his moral and emotional position regarding the film opens up his film-document, not only as a window (or frame) into the cultural collage of Albany Park, but also as a mirror, which reflects the viewer’s collage of memory and cultural history.

\textsuperscript{17} Typically in film, a sequence of shots or stills is called a montage. My use of the term “bricolage” instead of montage to describe Conquergood’s film has to do with my analyses, not of the film’s form, rather of the juxtapositions that Conquergood creates using his subjects (e.g. Albany Park’s diverse community members). To achieve this “collage” Conquergood doesn’t necessarily employ montage, meaning the splicing of his footage in a manner that would indicate certain editorial preoccupations such as the perceived passage of time in a film’s narrative, a flashback, or some point of visual emphasis. D. W. Griffith, director of the controversial silent film \textit{The birth of a nation} (1915) is credited with having developed the process of montage (Mast and Cohen, 1974). The montage facilitated the emergence of the feature-length film because it enabled filmmakers to make cinematographic decisions that made the movie watching experience more dynamic and even entertaining. The feature length film—with its use of montage—can be contrasted to long films that consist of a single non-moving shot, such as Andy Warhol’s \textit{Sleep} (1963), where a camera captures the torso of a young man sleeping for an uninterrupted five hours and twenty minutes. Warhol’s film is on par with footage one might find in a surveillance or building security video and actually comes closer to what I’m suggesting Conquergood does in his film, since apart from the camera angle(s) and the selection of the subject-matter, the construction of “meaning” in the film by the filmmaker is overtly avoided in order to make more room for the viewers’ interpretations. Warhol and Conquergood’s films aim to present a set of phenomena through a minimally-mediated channel. This attempt at objectivity (although arguably unattainable) makes their films more bricolage than montage.
The positioning of Conquergood’s documentary/bricolage as both a window (frame) and a mirror (or reflection of the viewer) is not two separate characteristics of the moment of bricolage. The moment of bricolage as “frame” and as “mirror” is a simultaneous occurrence because an audience member can look at a collage—whether its made with paper, dancers, or film—and look into another reality as well as reflect on their own reality. Thomas Brockelman (2001) speaks about collage’s ability to act as a frame and a mirror, pointing to collage’s “undecidability of its representational status” (p. 8). This undecidability imbues the dichotomy of this simultaneous frame and mirror with an aim that transcends merely creating new meanings. Brockelman’s states that as “both [a] revival of representation and [a] paradigm of antirepresentationalism, collage demands a view of the postmodern that resists polemicism. Which is precisely not to say that it is reducible to a kind of aesthetic play, telling us nothing about ourselves or our world…there is a kind of truth to collage, but the truth is precisely unsuited to articulation as an ideology” (p. 8). By this Brockelman is situating collage in a manner that attempts to make it more credible, while at the same time demystifying any inclinations the form might have towards becoming a “truth” that can be used as an ideology. It is true that Brockeleman is speaking to the object of collage, not the moment of bricolage that I’ve differentiated, but since what I am proposing is that a moment of

18 Brockelman’s reference to the “postmodern”—although interesting—is something I’m not undertaking in this part of the dissertation. In the introductory chapter of his The frame and the Mirror: On collage and the postmodern, Brockelman (2001) argues that the condition of postmodernism is not a chronologically situate moment which necessarily—and cleanly—followed the Twentieth-Century situation of Modernism. By this Brockelman also states that, since Postmodernism is not necessarily just something that occurs after Modernism, then there are significant instances—particularly in early collage (e.g. Picasso and Braque)—where the postmodern sensibility is introduced by the rupture that so-called Modern works of art initiated in the discourse surrounding the de facto representational property of images.
looking—even at a collage—can be a moment of bricolage, than Brockelman’s explanation about the simultaneous nature of the looking experience functions here too.

For Conquergood, the performance of bringing together disparate pieces (i.e. bricolage) presents a troubling of the act of “reading” as the primary way to decipher, experience and produce knowledge. For Brockelman, the collage equally presents the opportunity to show a “kind of truth”, but not one that will become the truth, at least not his truth. Both Conquergood and Brockelman, through their understanding of the collage/bricolage sensibility are saying something specific by not saying anything specific, merely presenting the components that can lead to something new. As is demonstrated in Conquergood’s film, the prerequisite of literacy or having a specific knowledge (about Albany Park, documentary films, sociology, art, pedagogy, or even politics) in regards to what he is presenting becomes void, replaced by an interior knowledge carried presumably by all who partake in the moment of bricolage, whether it be in its construction, dissemination, or consumption.

In an essay where Conquergood makes a case for learning through performance, he makes clear that the preeminence of “reading”—which obviously requires a specific knowledge fund as a mode of investigation—privileges firstly the literate, and secondly the powerful. Conquergood presents this clarification as a means to usurp some of the colonialist modes of operation that dominate academic, civic, and—as I’m attempting to underline here—creative pursuits. In Conquergood’s film, he positions the inhabitants of Albany Park and their stories as valuable even in their stark differences to each other and to those—such as myself—seeing them by means of the film. By limiting his moral and ethical position in relation to what is being captured in the video, Conquergood positions
the viewer of his documentary as the interpreter—the sense maker. But the sense that the
sense maker makes is not the prescribed sense that Conquergood prepared, rather the
“vast wealth” that emerges from the “brushing” together of this “mosaic of nationalities”
against this “map of gang nations”. What this analysis of Conquergood’s film, his collage
sensibility, and his attempt at neutrality introduce for civic-engagement art is an idea
about where creative practitioners position themselves in relation to the public(s), which
they attempt to engage in critical—often, emancipatory—discourse.

In many of the arts however, the “discourse” is frequently composed of individual
participants volleying unreciprocated monologues into a social ether, where direct
exchanges between artist and audience are infrequently made and sometimes
purposefully avoided. In civic engagement art though, there is an awareness of the social
chasm between people who are artists and people who are not. There is a preoccupation
with bringing that chasm to the fore, which puts both the artist and the audience in the
context of a developing—not completed, ready to be consumed—artworks, events, or life
moments, but rather moments of yet to be defined bricolage. Here civic engagement art
delineates a clear distinction between itself and works of performance art and relational
aesthetics in that it often loses control of itself. For pedagogy this can be a scary proposal,
but bringing it closer to the experiential realities of life this type of loss of control—even
if just temporarily—offers the opportunity for more stakeholders to become involved in
the development of their own pedagogical bricolage.

In recent years examples of civic engagement have become interestingly
generosity through art in the civic sphere. His text is divided into three parts. The first
part situates the move theoretically. The second details several projects that took place relatively close to the books production. In the last section, Purves, Jessica Ingram and Shane Aslan Selzer edit a type of “handbook” which includes short synopses of just fewer than one hundred examples of works of art that can fall into the bracket of civic engagement art. Some of those works include:

Jorgen Svensson provided free bus rides from Sweden’s capital, Stockholm to the small town that he grew up in, Skoghall.

Dan Peterman, a Chicago artist, in one of his many environmentally conscious, recycling-focused works, converted a bus into a homeless shelter whose heat was generated by horse manure.

Alicia Framis provided free walking companions for visitors of Utrecht. The companions one could acquire were all twins and the event was not documented.

Temporary Services, another outfit out of Chicago opened up a gallery where they gave away 9,000 items, a variety of items in boxes for whoever walked into the space.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles continued her investigations into the relationship between work and art by interviewing and documenting the work of “maintenance” workers all around Manhattan. This work was in relation to a work she made in 1976 when she worked for the New York City Department of Sanitation.

Lee Mingwei created origami sculptures out of money and then gave them away. Was he giving away money or art? In exchange, he only asked for conversation.
Michael Rakowitz created inflatable homes for the homeless called Parasites. These works took their pod-like form and heating by being attached to the heating and cooling vents on the outside of buildings.

Other examples include works by Rirkrit Tiravanija and Felix Gonzalez-Torres—of relational aesthetic fame—where the audience is invited to participate either by accepting a “gift” or partaking in some kind of aliment. Some artworks, which Grant Kester (2005) categorizes as “dialogical” after Suzi Gablik’s (1991) examination of literary critic Mikhail Bahktin’s (1990) early writings, promote both the act and the aesthetic of conversation as the principle objective and/or object in their projects.

Principle among many, Suzan Lacy spends years collaborating with communities of seemingly marginalized communities to, not only promote their dialogues, but also make the conversations of very specific demographics (e.g. elderly women, urban minority teenagers) available to those who are infrequently privy to these constituencies’ “voices” (Lacy, 1995). Important to observe in these works of civic engagement art, is the bricolage sensibility that they share with Conquergood’s ethnographic creative work, where at least one element of the bricolage is societal. The other similarity is the type of sovereignty that is “gifted”\(^\text{19}\) or permitted for those who consume or partake of these works. That is, as in Conquergood’s film, Purves, Ingram, and Selzar’s catalogue of social engagement art, Kester’s dialogic artists, and Lacy’s community based durational works, the authors put forth a willingness to let those who engage in or with their work to make their own choices about how the works should or shouldn’t be interacted with and

\(^{19}\text{In some instances “returned”.}\)
interpreted. Frequently, participation in works of social engagement art is optional and
democratic, requiring very little—or readily available forms of—currency exchange on
behalf of its participants. Participants—as in the Lee Mingwei origami crane work—can
pay with conversation or take what was being offered for free; the “audience” is
ultimately a co-constructor of the works whose absence would ultimately nullify the
works existence. Sometimes, as in the case of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Jorgen Svensson
or Alicia Framis, the participants may have not even been aware that they were getting an
artwork delivered to them in the form of some social service. This crossover—into a
place where art is drowned out by life—is another place from which the enactment of
currere, as a more aware form of engagement, can be provoked.
Chapter 2

Pedagogy as contemporary art practice
A Break from all this unpacking

Let us revisit the basic ideas of some of the terms I’ve discussed so far. The previous chapter began with a disclaimer where I identified a working difference between the tasks of defining a term and unpacking it. I felt that defining a term would limit my engagement with the concepts discussed in this chapter in two ways. First of all, limiting a term with a fixed definition would stifle the potential to examine the nuances of a particular idea (e.g. the difference between big “C” conceptual art and ultra-conceptual art). Secondly, the metaphor of unpacking—meaning the actual physical gesture of taking a packed item out of its container—allows me to conduct my analyzes of these ideas by literally displacing small components from the “inside” of a given idea in order to examine these components from multiple angles, possibly rearranging them without taking them apart altogether. In other words, the “inside” parts of an idea may have remained as they’ve been defined by previous scholars, but I have reconfigured them in order to propose working arguments for my dissertation.

From this logistical hurdle I then proceeded to unpack my use of the term “permissions”, a manner of research that I use to propose alternative creative behaviors for both teachers and artists. I can see how some might say that my proposal for “permissions” is merely what most call “inspiration”, but what I’m proposing here is something more like building a vocabulary that need not be inspiring in any uplifting way. Essentially the process of gathering permissions is more like developing literacy, where a student examines—not just the “how” of what is being done by someone else—but also the “why”. Mode of operation (MO) piggy-backs on “permissions” a little bit in that the MO is one of the things the student/teacher/researcher/artist may be looking for
from other practitioners. Except MO mainly has to do with behaviors or what I call “ways of being”. These type of things are seen in how artist—not only conduct their artmaking practices—but also in a slew of intangibles that may only be observed through a personal connection with that artist or through the study of his or her periphery documents (e.g. interviews, narratives, testimonies, works of criticism by others, historical documents, videos, photos, etc.).

After speaking to “permissions” and MO I moved on to describe bricolage, particularly the definition proposed by anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Levi-Strauss proposal for the understanding of bricolage allowed me to distinguish it from its cousin collage. Through my unpacking, collage proved to be more concentrated on an actual “thing” to be looked at and bricolage was more of an attitude or mode of operation. This makes bricolage more useful to the research I’m laying out in this dissertation since it proposes that there is a mode of operation—a way of being—that is determined by how one behaves or conducts portions of their life contiguous to one another. This is crucial since pedagogy is a very specialized kind of “living” that is done in a public forum, and begs to be infused with modes of operation, which allow it to transition from knowledge dissemination to knowledge creation. Once bricolage was unpacked and laying all over the place I unpacked conceptual art in an attempt to demonstrate how this form of making work finds a kinship with modes of operation that are markedly pedagogical. I defined conceptual art by differentiating it from its historical signifier, but also by speaking about several kinds of work that can fall under the conceptual art moniker. Durational art, performance art, the time-bomb, relational aesthetics, civic engagement art are all forms of conceptual practice which frequently are participatory, dematerialized—although not
always—and heavily involved with alternative modes of conducting a pedagogical moment or project.

On some level these nine unpacked terms can be designated as the components (elements) that could be used in the enactment of pedagogy as a contemporary art practice. What follows is, what one might designate as the applications (principles) of these various components for my project. What does the application of these components propose for the enactment of curriculum? For emancipatory thinking and making? And finally for a process where education and art stakeholders are able to enact a pedagogical moment as a work of contemporary art practice.

The enactment of curriculum

Curriculum as “currere”; conceptualized first by William Pinar and Madeline Grumet (1976) and later elaborated by Pinar (2004) as, “not an instructional device” (p. 36), but rather as “an intensified engagement with daily life” (p. 37) is a situational mode of conducting a pedagogical endeavor that finds a kinship with conceptual art modes of operation. Currere as enactment, rather than mere implementation, can be examined in order to further understand what it might mean to do contemporary art practice as pedagogy and vice versa. Enacting currere can be understood first and foremost as a process, a work unfolding amongst the learners, which includes both student(s) and teacher(s).

The concept of currere in its most basic manifestation plays a subversive role in the field of curriculum studies. It is not the anti-curriculum per se, but curriculum scholars have often cited it as a means of conducting curriculum practice and research in
opposition to the dictionary definition of curriculum practiced in many educational settings. The Random House dictionary sitting on my bookshelf describes curriculum as the “*regular or …particular course* (italics mine) of study in a school” (1992, p. 333). The reason it is important to begin from this point of difference, rather than with a declarative statement about “what *currere* is”, is to point out how *currere* in curriculum studies can become conceptual art practice’s bridge into progressive pedagogical conversations. The “bridge” that I speak of here is—in fact—created by *currere*’s oppositions to standard curricular practices, and solidified by the fact that *currere* can’t actually be thought of in terms of “what it is”. *Currere*, much like conceptual art, can only be thought of in terms of “what it can be”.

In his germinal *What is curriculum theory*, William Pinar (2004) says *currere* “provides a strategy for students of curriculum to study the relations between academic knowledge and life history in the interest of self-understanding and social reconstruction” (p. 35). According to Pinar “there are four steps or moments in the method of *currere*: the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the synthetical” (p. 35). These four moments—which I will explain below—open up an area of crossover between the making of conceptual artworks and curriculum practice. The crossover that *currere* provides for teacher and artist’s practices open up the practice of one for the other. In other words, what Pinar suggests as currere-practice can—if looked at through a contemporary art practice lens—be interpreted as conceptual art practice.

We can continue our discussion of currere, particularly its quality of overlaid simultaneous multiplicities, and how *it* can be overlaid with pedagogy as conceptual art practice by looking at another one of John Cage’s compositions. William Wilson (1981)
calls Cage’s chance generated music—in particular the *Williams Mix* of 1952—“a music of operations [that] presents not a dramatic necessity, but possibilities—some trends, fluctuations, and uncertainties, with *many live alternatives* [emphasis mine] to what is actually happening. In such open systems, operations combine with operations, and these cooperations further combine in loose correlations with a suggestion of endlessness (p. 92). The William’s Mix is considered to be the first work of electronic music. Cage accumulated recordings of “found-sound” for a full year and then according to a chance methodology that included the use of the *I-Ching*, or book of changes, Cage created the splicing directives for the work. The very outcome of the work was not directed by Cage’s sense of music per se, but rather by a dictation that was outside of himself, namely the *I-Ching*. This suspension of direct and total authorship on behalf of Cage provided him the opportunity to participate in the reception of his own work in a manner similar to that of his audience. Frequently, when Cage’s audience came to hear one of his performances, Cage too, was hearing the work for the first time. In some ways, Cage’s use of these chance operations obliterated the need to have to wait for time to pass in order to reap the benefits of the “time-bomb”. By introducing the *I-Ching* as an arbiter for the making of his work, Cage allowed himself to be the initiator of the work as well as to be included in receiving the surprises, which his chance operation compositions provided for his audiences. Cage exemplified both forms of time usage that I’ve delineated when talking about conceptual art by establishing time frames, like the performance artist Tehching Hsieh, and setting off time-bombs like Duchamp in order to not only be the author of the work but simultaneously a member of its audience.
Keeping in mind Cage’s use of the two materializations of time in his conceptual art—duration and time-bomb—I’d like to draw particular attention to the manner in which they resonate with Pinar’s analysis of the currere moments. As I mentioned prior to talking about Cage’s Williams Mix, Pinar (2004) divided currere into four steps that can occur overlapped or in differing sequences with each other. I talk about each step below.

**Regressive step**- This step functions, not unlike, the initial moment of bringing a preexisting “source” or component into the act of bricolage. As a matter of fact, Pinar calls the inclusion of lived experience during this step, “data source” (p. 36) again alluding to its potential to be interpreted as bricolage. Pinar uses the psychoanalytic convention of free association to conjure up what he calls “one’s apparently past ‘lived’ or existential experience” (p. 36). Pinar states that this regressive step allows one to “enlarge—and transform—one’s memory” (p.36), as well to look at how the past “hovers over the present” (p. 36). Although this is drawing from the subconscious in Pinar’s suggestion, I believe that this production of the “data source” or conjuring up of past knowledge, memories, etc. can be done in any number of ways, including through chance operations like Cage’s, the following of open-ended directives like Hsieh, and through the bricoleur response to “data sources” that came with Conquergood’s *Heart broken in two*.

**Progressive step**- Here Pinar suggests, “one looks toward what is not yet the case” (p. 36). This step is on par with imagination, a term, which is overused in the arts to the point of dissipation, voiding it of any actual usable meaning. Inventiveness might serve this step better in that it resonates with Pinar’s thought that during the progressive step,
“the student of currere imagines possible futures” (p. 36). It may seem like I’m contradicting myself here by saying “no” to the use of the term imagination and “yes” to Pinar’s “imagine possible futures”, but the truth is that I wish to challenge the use of the term imagination as something that happens strictly in the mind. Inventiveness, unlike imagination, directs the student and viewer into a part of that moment of imagining that seeks to generate newness from what is being observed, analyzed or deconstructed. In other words, imagination is just a conjuring up of the mind that can be left unexplored. What I’m proposing here is not a complete disavowal of imagination (that would be ludicrous), rather through enactment, making, and doing one can actually expand the imagination. Pinar’s “imagines possible futures” sounds more proactive to me.

I present it to my drawing students in this way sometimes: do and then look, and then do again. What I’m proposing here is what many artists, inventors, and scientist know and that is that you don’t know exactly what you are imagining until you make it manifest. I’m proposing that the “doing” is the imagining. We can also see it in the example of bricolage, which usually involves the moving of pieces, while secondarily observing. This is settled by the very notion that you can close your eyes and still make a valid collage with just your hands. Closing one’s eyes would be on par with Cage’s use of the I-Ching to produce unexpected results. Whether the maker opens their eyes to examine the collage almost becomes secondary, because the collage doesn’t need to be looked at critically in order for it to be a collage. Again, it’s the mere joining of the separate sources that makes it a collage. In this way the progressive step of currere is not just about imagining possible futures, but about actually making them. Making them is first.
**Analytical step**- During this third step, the student performs a meta-process by becoming aware of the overlapping nature of both the regressive and the progressive steps. Pinar states, “one’s distantiation from past and future functions to create a subjective space of freedom in the present” (p.36). At this point the student is in the drivers seat. This is not unlike the propositions that durational and time-bomb conceptual artists use in their engagement with their works’ viewers. The viewers are put in control of how and what the work may mean. The viewers continue and sometimes finish the piece; they decide what’s next; they decide whether the artwork/ the educational moment lives or dies. They do this by what they decide to do with what has been presented in front of them; that is, they accept it, transform it, reject it, or store it for later “detonation”.

**Synthetical step**- In this final step—which is at the end, but has a beginning quality to it—the student/ viewer makes a choice. What is to be done with this past, future, present, and the awareness of this whole process’s bricolage nature? Pinar recalls the words of Mary Aswell Doll (2000) in order to capture the interiority of what the synthetical step brings to the currere process. “Curriculum is also…a coursing, as in an electric current. The work of the curriculum theorist should tap this intense current within, that which courses through the inner person, that which electrifies or gives life to a person’s energy source” (cited in Pinar, 2004, p. 37). The Synthetical step is a moment of choice for either the audience member in art or the learner in pedagogy. The choice can be posed as two questions. The first is “am I done?” Has the learner “learned” what needed to be learned? And the second is “what does this moment of learning open up—presumably, but not necessarily—for future learning?” This second question means, what
can be done with this small increment of learning that has occurred and how can it (the learning) be put back into a circulation that repeats the four steps of currere infinitely?

Pinar states that these four moments help the individual “understand the contribution academic studies makes to one’s understanding of his or her life” (p. 36). Going a step further, Pinar points to Jerome Bruner’s (1996) idea that individual’s academic and life discoveries are jointly “imbricated in society, politics and culture” (Pinar, 2004, p. 36). This “imbrication” opens the door for academic and life experiences to be reconsidered as art works which foreground conceptualism and pedagogy intertwined and inseparable. Performance artist, writer, and former teacher of mine, Matthew Goulish (2004), making a comparison to the circulatory system, asks if this folded-over—imbricated—type of making/learning can be negotiated as a “dialogue of juxtaposition” (p. 185). That is, a way of working that is coming and going—over itself—without destroying itself, not unlike how blood courses through the two-way—however singular—passages of our veins. Speaking of Cage’s 1952 happening at Black Mountain Collage, Henry Sayre (1989) spoke through Bertolt Brecht’s “Gesamtkunstwerk or integrated work of art” (p. 108) and characterized the experience…as a “muddle”, a situation that lacks a foreseeable end through which one must wade slowly.

Although the bulk of my teaching experience predates my encounter with Pinar’s theory of currere I have come to recognize how this theory, which applies to very specific pedagogical moments, relates to my own teaching. As I identified in my introduction, since the beginning of my teaching career I have approached my pedagogical practice as a creative activity—a muddle of sorts—allowing for all the
markers of a robust art endeavor to dictate the trajectory of my curricular planning and pedagogical experimentation and execution. Now in reflection, I have identified Pinar’s proposal for currere, to be what Aoki (2005) and other curriculum theorists joyously call a “lived curriculum” (p. 199). I identify the collaborative and co-constructed engagement among teachers, makers, and learners within a currere-esque pedagogical moment as moving beyond content delivery.

Once this very simple gesture away from schooling is performed, the stakeholders can move their pedagogical situation into areas that have been theorized and identified by other scholars as caring (Noddings, 2005); conviviality and deschooling (Illich, 1970 and 1973); living with difference (Todd, 2003); associations and explorations of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1971/2007); encouragement and use of chance systems, (Iverson, 2010); highlighting the situational (Debord, 1960/2009); pedagogy as emancipation (hooks, 1994; Friere, 1998); ecological awareness (Orr, 1991); political access and prowess (Camnitzer, 2009) and dematerialization’s potential to help interpret many of these pedagogical concepts into art (Lippard and Chandler, 1968/1999). Of course, these citations don’t even begin to cover the wealth of writing that tackles everyone of these strategies within the pedagogical or art moment. I’m merely trying to lay out the complexity of what can be stemmed in and out of a curricular/pedagogical practice that is enacted—as Pinar said—“not as an instructional device” (p. 36), but rather as “an intensified engagement with daily life” (p. 37).

The purpose of this comparison between currere and conceptual art will be to open up a space for the pedagogical practitioner to practice as a contemporary artist and for the contemporary artist to practice as a purveyor of educational and education-like
experiences. Although it may appear that this dissertation suggests delineated behaviors for the blurring of the artist/educator divide, my intention is not to propose a template for this to occur, rather to introduce an alternative vocabulary that might describe what many educators and artists already do in terms that could change the meaning—and possibly the intent—of both of their practices. The similarities between conceptual art practice and pedagogy point to the fact that it is not wholly necessary to blur the line that separates the two practices. However, giving practitioners of both fields—and in particular those who portend to have a foot in each field—permission to travel from one to the other in a more intuitive manner can be an emancipatory gesture for both the worlds of making and pedagogy, two worlds that are admittedly not wholly dissimilar.

**Stop and think: emancipation by tension and confusion**

There is an irony in conceptual art though that needs to be addressed. It is an irony that creates a wonderful tension, which again, pushes the conceptual mode of operation into a pedagogical realm. The art market/Art World capitalizes on the moments when “art” is not in “doubt” as Kaprow put it. Since most “visible”—or well-known—conceptual artists’ depend on their association with materialized “art and its discourses” in order to obtain cultural, academic, and financial capital from the Art World, it can be interpreted as ironic, at best, that scholarship about conceptual art even exists. The British art historian Charles Harrison (1991)—whose definition of the Art World I use throughout this dissertation—noted the importance of the symbiosis between dematerialization and materialization when he wrote, “the supposed ‘critique’ of the art object on which the various [conceptual] artists were engaged [during the late 60’s]…was not addressed to all art objects in general but specifically to the high-art object as
construed in the Modernist theory of the 1950’s and early 1960s” (p. 31). In other words, Conceptual Art (here Harrison is clearly speaking about big “C” conceptual art), despite its often-lauded reputation as reactionary, anti-establishment, periphery, and “anti-art”, is inextricably tied to its supposed antithesis, the “high-art object”. Harrison’s idea makes me wonder if conceptual art—invoking dematerialization, public engagement, the material of time, and relationality is a problematic metaphor and model for an emancipatory pedagogical practice.

I suppose, if the objective was to transplant the same exact modes of operation from conceptual art to emancipatory pedagogy, the answer would be “no” since that would involve something very specific concerning taste and certain clusters of privileged knowledge that I’m not particularly interested in reifying. The useful parallels between conceptual art practices and emancipatory pedagogy lie, not in the practices, but in the tensions induced by the relationship of the two. The positioning for prominence between the object and the non-object in contemporary art discourse is on par with the conversation that has been occurring in curriculum and pedagogy studies for the last seventy years where traditional\(^{20}\) and progressive approaches to education have been teeter-tottering in an attempt to establish what is important in education. As I have demonstrated, seemingly antagonistic—object/ non-object art or progressive/traditional pedagogy—approaches are dependent on each other in order for their radicality to remain

\(^{20}\)I use the term “traditional” in education as a direct opposite to Dewey’s “progressive” propositions (see Dewey, 1938). The roots of the “traditional” model that is still pervasive in many “skill and drill” curricular approaches are found in the writings of educational psychologist Edward Thorndike (see Thorndike, 1901), who was more focused on knowledge attainment, rather then knowledge creation—the latter of which my pedagogy relates more readily to.
important as one of the driving forces in creating significant change in the lives of people. Whether progressive education or conceptual art retains its potential for radicalness and change may seem beyond the point to the purveyors of the progressive education agenda since their aim is to bring their emancipatory “goods” into the mainstream, to those “less-fortunate” who don’t have them. Doing so achieves the suppression, if not elimination, of the more “traditional” pedagogical forms, which are perceived to be antiquated and oppressive to the populations being taught. The tension between the object and non-object in art proposes that the indefinite back and forth between two opposing sides actually is what generates the working energy for the more liberal side, whether it’s conceptual art over object art or progressive pedagogy over traditional pedagogy. If either pole were to fix itself or feel as if its opposite had been diminished, then it would cease being what it currently prides itself in being, namely, a more just, emancipating, and empowering opposite. Conceptual art, much like progressive education, lives most vibrantly as an “anti-”, an agitator, and a provocateur of cultural and educational assumptions.

Take for example an experience I had recently with Empty Shoe Box—an installation work by the Mexican conceptual artist Gabriel Orozco—created for the 1993 Venice Biennale, and reinstalled at Orozco’s 2009 mid-career retrospective at MOMA, where I encountered it. During a 2001 lecture Orozco recounted how the work was executed and how people reacted to it. Upon arriving at the Venice venue where his work was to be displayed, Orozco realized that he had very little room to show his work. He decided, “working with the idea of containers and the void” (p. 88) to present a shoebox. He placed a white shoebox on the floor at the end of a highly trafficked hall. Minutes
before the show was set to open, the box was gone! Mistaking it for trash, the piece had been thrown out. This happened several times resulting in the curator of the exhibition proposing to Orozco that the box be glued to the floor. Orozco said no to this, arguing that, “if [he] glued it to the floor, it would be destroyed by its own resistance. It would be better to let it be kicked and for the container to take the blows and ricochet all over the place” (p. 88). Orozco’s resistance to making the work more permanent or archival (even for just the duration of the exhibition) resulted in some unpredictable effects, eventually, with people thinking that it was a money collection box and depositing coins in it.

Although familiar with many of Orozco’s works, I saw this piece at the entrance to his 2009 MOMA show for the first time, and the experience was as Orozco intended it, confusing. The work did what Orozco (2001) intended it to do, “be disappointing, especially for the public that already has an idea of what art should be” (p. 88). The tensions created by works such as Orozco’s Empty shoebox create a “what-is-it”, personal meaning-making moment. If this moment were to become fixed or “answered”—even temporarily or incorrectly—the conceptual gesture would lose its progressive pedagogy parallel. In other words, when the work becomes any less confusing, or for that matter, any more “like art”, then it falls back under the “traditional” pedagogical model, which seeks to attain knowledge rather then create it.

The original progressive voice in education was, of course, John Dewey. Dewey’s propositions about the importance of experience in education can further augment the kinship that I’m making with conceptual art’s emancipatory, people-centered, situational, proposals for both art and pedagogy. The Empty Shoe Box’s confusion provides what Dewey (1938) would call “a field of previously unfamiliar”(p. 79), staging a “problem”,
which he proposes is the “the stimulus to thinking” (p. 79) and thinking can be open ended, potentially purpose-free, and generative.

Recognizing what the reactionary and “thinking” modes of both conceptual art and Dewey’s progressive idea for pedagogy offer a methodological backbone for scholarship that already plays with the separate components that I’m identifying in this opening chapter. Performance pedagogy (Garoian, 1999), performance ethnography (Denzin, 2003), and alternative qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2010; Four Arrows, 2008), all record conceptual art as pedagogy and pedagogy as conceptual art, and propose an emancipatory arena that Dewey (1938) claims as the “ideal of education”, which is the “creation of power of self-control” (p.64). This becomes important for an artist/pedagogue like me, because as a student in the American school system I had a history of poor performance, which I believe is due in part to my coming from an under-privileged, under-represented, bilingual, and immigrant demographic. In other words, as much as I was to blame for my inability to tap into schooling culture as a kid, I also never felt as if I had any control over my own situation. My history began to change through my engagement with art though. Art made me feel more in control; it made me become aware of my potential for agency in the education I was being asked to participate in.

The way that Dewey explains this sense of self or “more” control is by connecting it with “thinking”, saying that thinking is “thus a postponement of immediate action, while it effects internal control of impulse through a union of observation and memory, this union being the heart of reflection” (p. 64). The reflection that Dewey says arises here is not automatic; it is caused by something. The “something” here is identified by Dewey as what causes a person to “stop and think”(p. 64), that is, a stimulus that causes
the learner to do “some reconstruction, some remaking” (p. 64). Dewey’s progressive pedagogy as conceptual art (and—at least in my case—as emancipatory pedagogical art practice), with its tendency to create confusion, tension, and generate thinking—like my experience with Orozco’s *Empty shoe box*—can also be “disappointing” especially for those who have preconceived notions of what education should be.

For my parents, who expected me to conform to school in the way that they understood I should, my school failures were a disappointment. In retrospect, looking back at Orozco’s use of the term “disappointing”, the ruptures that my failures provoked—namely my involvement with art as an alternative to my underachievement in school’s core subjects—became the moments when I began to “stop and think” and when the trajectory of my educational biography developed its emancipatory wings.

The sudden “stop” which was provoked in me by conceptual art some years after my initial introduction to art, brought another kind of “thinking” to me. It was the kind of thinking that needed more in order to sustain itself. It was then—as I described in my introduction—that education began to matter to me because the process felt significant. What was happening in my mind, in my body and in my spirit felt important. My mind, body, and spirit felt as if they could “do”. I felt that I could “do”.

This discovery of an educational urgency through my engagement with art also became a post-colonialist breakthrough for me, even though at the time I didn’t even know what colonialism (and its effect on me) was. I did know that I was under a “spell”, an anxiety about not being “white”, more affluent, having “foreigner” relatives, or speaking another language other than English. As a child I understood that what I had at
home was very different than what other kids in my school had at home. Homi Bhabha (1994) paraphrased Jurgen Habermas when he stated that the post-colonialist project, “seeks to explore those social pathologies—‘loss of meaning, conditions of anomie’—that no longer simply ‘cluster around class antagonism, [but] break up into widely scattered historical contingencies. These contingencies are often the ground of historical necessity for elaborating empowering strategies of emancipation” (p. 171) and I believe that this is what conceptual art, and later a particular litany of emancipatory pedagogues provided for me as a learner and a maker, “strategies of emancipation”.

For years I was ashamed of being Mexican and lower middle class. To think that I could live as a practicing artist, engaged in critical discourses—even about my own identity—was not on my radar until I was made to stop and think by some particularly abrupt and counter-intuitive encounters with artists’ and pedagogues’ modes of operation. This is why as simplistic as my proposal for gathering permissions from artists’ and pedagogues’ modes of operation might appear, for me, performing this gesture has been—literally—freeing and life changing.

In chapter five I will further elaborate by delivering an auto-ethnographic short history of how I gathered permissions throughout my elementary and high school experience despite having been an underperforming student. I will then describe how the ruptures that made me stop and think—such as teachers, artists, artworks and their modes of operation—propelled me to develop my philosophy for a pedagogy as contemporary art practice, which I’ve now been implementing for more than twelve years.
Pedagogy as contemporary art practice and vice versa

Recently, a cohort of creative practitioners—including critics, historians, and curators—have begun to inhabit the liminal space created by the type of examination that I’m suggesting in this dissertation. Liam Gillick, Anton Vidokle, Okwui Enwezor, and Ute Meta Bauer have been some of the more visible investigators of this art/pedagogical crossover by opening up alternative educational spaces and forums—publications, symposiums, curatorial projects, and performances—that function within the current pluralistic discourses of contemporary conceptual art and critical pedagogy. The only problem is that these conceptual art excursions into the realm of pedagogy—although carrying plenty of Art World cache—have gone mostly ignored in the field of art education and education in general. The art education literature, with only a few exceptions, is largely vacant of material dedicated to an examination of conceptual art practice and its potential for pedagogical discourse. Like the Futurists, Dadaist, Situationist, Happening artists, and Fluxus participants in the West, the pedagogical efforts of these contemporary practitioners have been relegated to the periphery of the larger—more visual—art mainstream which often favors the traditions of evident labor, skill, and permanence to the seemingly flippant—some might still say, subversive—heterogeneously inclusive, and undefined transience of these forms of ultra-conceptual art.

Taking my cues from these contemporary practitioners I have recently been a part of two experiments, which have allowed me to put some of my theories about pedagogy as contemporary art practice under the microscope. One of these projects was conducted in what would undoubtedly be identified as an academic space, the university at which I
teach. The other was conducted in what many identify as an art space, Cobalt Studio in Chicago. Having this second event in an art gallery ultimately was complicated because of the notably pedagogical activities that were held in the space in lieu of showing a collection of art objects.

At the University of Illinois, where I currently teach in the School of Art and Design, I was given the opportunity to design and teach a graduate seminar based on my personal research interests. Since my service on the faculty of U of I was concurrent with my completion of this dissertation I thought it advantageous to teach a course that was linked to what I was trying to get at in this research project. As it turned out, teaching that course ended up clarifying for me what my intention was for this dissertation project. The course that I offered in the spring of 2011 at U of I was called *Contemporary art practices as pedagogy* and twelve students; ten graduates and two undergraduate seniors took it. The structure of the course was typical of what you might see in other grad schools. The students were required to do readings, make presentations, facilitate discussion, and do some sort of culminating project. I took it as a personal challenge to imbue the form of the course—meaning how the course moved along—with what I thought was the core objective of my research and the course. At the beginning of the course, before I actually knew what the course was “about”, I thought had it to do with a very simple directive. I basically asked my students, “How do you make something that is not art—like a class—art?” This was a question that was asked with my voice, but also with every action I took in relation to the class: the discussions, the social gatherings outside of class, the assignments, the readings, the syllabus, and even how we had snacks in class.
In order to allow for some possibilities to emerge from this challenge I set up some parameters for the students and myself. My first parameter was to purposefully release the class from my hands. That is, after I had formulated some basic activities that could be conducted throughout the semester, I wanted the students to take over. I even formulated the activities and assignments for the students in a manner that would dissuade them from producing anything in class that I may have imagined in my head. While describing the assignments in the syllabus I had no preconceived form of what they might look like. I had never taught this course and truth be told, I wasn’t interested in “doing school” with this classroom full of capable, interesting, and talented adults. I felt that introducing a chance MO into the assignments would make the students work’s less my “thing” and more a “thing” I could watch unfold. I gathered the “permission” to place myself in the role of an audience member within an artwork/course from John Cage’s MO of introducing chance operations into his work in order to be surprised by what came next. Curriculum theorists Dalke and Lesnick (2011) describe “surprise” in the enactment of curriculum as

Vulnerable, destabilizing, [and a] dynamic state. It can apply to attack or failure, but also to astonishing, wonder, and delight. Surprise…is [an] ingredient to learning: a sudden, unexpected shift—truly a change—of perspective, awareness, or connection that comes about when new knowledge interacts with what we knew before. Without openness to surprise, we struggle to give and take what is not already planned, scripted, or encoded in the prescribed roles we assume in communities and in classrooms. We do not easily change the program; we find it hard to
exceed expectations except along predetermined channels. We become more mechanical, and perhaps less inclined to notice new possibilities. (p. 77)

Pushing this course’s pedagogy towards the realms of contemporary art practice was driven by the thirst for surprise that is evident in the above citation. Because of this, all of the parameters that I developed for the enactment of the course were intended to proliferate moments of surprise for the students and me. The second parameter had to do with the most prescribed portion of college schooling, the syllabus. I wrote it as a personal letter, not as a checklist, causing one of the students—an older woman—to later tell me that it was the most entertaining syllabus she has ever read. She was being serious when she said it. I began the syllabus like this:

Greetings. Welcome to a course that is also an artwork. Pointing to one of the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn’s working tenets, “Energy: Yes! Quality: No!” let us forget about succeeding in this course and let us concentrate on generating the most possible energy out of our time together. You may take this call to “energy” as some sort of descriptor, but let us not close the possibilities of this course too soon. In fact, if there is a descriptor that should be looked at, let it be the one about openness that I just posited over Hirschhorn’s “energy” tenet. Let this course be open and let us travel in and out of it forever.
I followed this introduction with logistical notes (e.g. contact information, times, etc.), but all of that was also written informally, as if I was sending someone an email about when and where we were meeting.

Our meeting room for the spring semester of 2011 will be room 240, although on the first class session we will have visited another (more open space) and on the second class we will have met for dinner in the instructor’s home. I am the instructor of this course, Jorge Lucero, and I can be contacted in a variety of ways. If you wish to see me in person, you can visit my office during the lunch hour (12-1 pm) on most Tuesdays…If you find this singular meeting hour inconvenient to your schedule, please feel free to set up an appointment with me at an alternative time. I would be more than happy to make suitable accommodations to meet with you.

For me—despite the over-the-top tone—writing this syllabus was very serious. I understood that the students may have seen what I was doing in the syllabus as gimmicky or “entertaining”, but my intention with writing the syllabus in this inviting manner was—in a way—to formulate a contract for myself. You see, I felt that if I was generous, loving, and open in my syllabus but then reverted to a mode that was not integral to that tone in my teaching that the students would retroactively discard the whole-hearted intention of this initial gesture as disingenuous. Yes, I can imagine that some students were cynical at first, thinking me too flowery or maybe artificial, but—for me—that was the challenge, to live up to the openness of this introductory document.
So much of what happens in contemporary art practice—particularly in conceptual art—has to do with intention. This is evident since often times we don’t actually see what an artist says about his or her work aligning with what the artist’s product says about the artist’s words. For me, laying out the syllabus with thorough intent became the single most complicated gesture of the whole “pedagogy as contemporary art” project. The syllabus was the concept. The level of vulnerability in the syllabus was also important to me since I felt that I wanted the students to hold me accountable to the power structure I was trying to emulate in the course, namely an even pedagogical lab where I didn’t presume to know what students could bring to the discourse. This passage shows some of that vulnerability:

I have paid very detailed attention to make sure that every decision executed via this document are integral and with your best interest in mind. It may seem odd to see this level of meta-awareness in something as quotidian as a syllabus, but that’s exactly the point: let us start, even from this syllabus, paying closer attention to the gestures we make in the world, particularly the ones we identify as pedagogical and/or aesthetic.

And also in this one:

My intention for this course is that it be of utmost use to you. If at any point it is not, I welcome an open dialogue of ideas in order to make this semester’s work of maximum benefit to you as your pursue—not only a career—but a lifestyle as an artist, educator, researcher, etc. I have a strict policy against wasting time, yours and mine. If there is ever anything that
we are investigating in class which you find to be consuming time unnecessarily please do not hesitate to let me know. This will not reflect poorly on you, as long as you communicate with me in a respectful and professional manner. Your observations about the course will only be used to improve the course and never taken in a negative way against you or your classmates. This is a promise, which I’ve decided to put in writing so that you can hold me to it. This is your education after all and I want to help you make it life enhancing and generative. With an open discourse we will, not only be able to learn from this course, but from everything that feeds into and out of the ideas taught in this class.

The assignments students enacted during the course carried much of this level of trust that I have in students’ ability to execute pedagogy as an artwork. The students pulled it off spectacularly, many commenting in their end-of-the-semester evaluations how transformative the course had been for their way of thinking. That’s a funny thing—what they said in their evaluations—because on many levels, I didn’t know exactly what they were talking about. I didn’t know because—I’m assuming—that they each had very unique and personal experiences with the material and the texture of the course.

The way I laid out the assignments can be seen in detail in Appendix A, but I think it might be important to wrap up my discussion of this course/artwork here by describing the culminating projects undertaken by us all. Students were asked at the beginning to put together a book of two hundred collages, with very little additional directions. As was to be expected, within a few days of handing out the syllabus, I received an email from a student asking if I could clarify what I meant by collage. I told
this student that I would answer that query in class, since I suspected that others were interested in what I had to say on that topic also. The subtext that I understood in this student’s question though was “what do you want us to do?” and so I prepared my answer in defiance of that subtext.

I answered the question about collage by showing more than a hundred and fifty images, all in contradiction of each other, some collages not even two-dimensional. In other words, I answered the question by demonstrating that I didn’t mean anything specific when I said “collage”—at least not in terms of the look of a collage—and what I really meant was that I wanted them to enact a type of behavior, Levi-Strauss’s bricoleur to be more specific. In the directions for this book of “collages”, which are found in the syllabus, I also asked them to keep in mind that this book that they create should be made in a manner that could then be gifted to one of their classmates. I offered them a self-publishing website that could produce their books for cheap so that they wouldn’t have to give away any original artwork if they didn’t want to, but some of them chose to make handmade, one of kind books, which—in the end—they admitted were hard to part with. But they did. On the final day of class each student brought a book of collages, all through the filter of whatever they understood the directive to create a collage meant.

One student put all of his collages on a computer jump-drive and then put that jump-drive in a hand made box shaped like a book. Another student collected all the recyclable flat material that came with the packaged food she consumed since the beginning of the course and stitched it altogether into an enormous collection of heterogeneous, odd-shaped pages. Still another transformed a children’s Bible into their collage collection. One of the two public school teachers in the course, had each one of his fourth grade
students cut up and make drawings on paper placemats that they used during their lunch period at their school; he bound all this together in a black binder that was somewhat hard to carry, let alone store on a book shelf. It was an amazing sight. Some students used the opportunity to make something personal; others made the works as distant from themselves as possible. It wasn’t important to me that the students keep this new collage book that was made by one of their classmates. What was important was that they enact this process of putting one piece of information next to another in order to see what type of energy they derived from it. I was surprised and pleased with the gamut of examples that were produced, not one was alike another.

In the middle of the semester that I conducted this course I was contacted by someone I knew at Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE). CAPE is an organization dedicated to arts integration and research in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). CAPE had been recently given a space at Art Chicago, an international contemporary art fair, that is held at the Merchandise Mart just outside of Chicago’s Loop. CAPE wanted to know if I could partner with them in order to curate an exhibition that was reflective of what CAPE does with teaching artists and CPS. They were interested in participating in Art Chicago without their contribution at the fair looking merely like a display space. I was immediately interested since it is this type of flipping of expectations that I am interested in when it comes to this idea of pedagogy as contemporary art practice. I brought the idea to my graduate students—seeking their contributions—and they were all excited to participate. This became a very public opportunity to execute what we had been doing and looking at in class. Our pedagogy as
contemporary art practice was going to have the opportunity to be less of private university project, and more of an unpredictable—less controlled—public spectacle.

We held various meetings outside of class, met with CAPE staff, looked over a hefty selection of the CAPE archive that was mailed down to Champaign for us, and began documenting our discussions in a collective Google.doc that the whole class contributed to. In the end, after several discussions about how we could perform a curatorial gesture that was equally indicative of our concerns as scholars and students, we ended up publishing several hundred copies of our jointly authored Google.doc and gifting it to the public at Art Chicago. Because CAPE’s space at Art Chicago was also near a few windows, we also created a Minimalist installation using some of the words from our collective discussion. The installation was composed of our text printed on translucent sheets of adhesive paper, which was then placed over the windows allowing the outside light into the building but also magnifying some of these “ghost-words” that were produced during our discussions prior to the show.

In an unanticipated manner we were able to execute two moments of pedagogy as contemporary art practice within one class. The first was the course itself, which had at its core the repeated gesture of figuring out how to behave as bricoleurs; and the second was the exhibition that we put on at Art Chicago, which had the look of an art show but the thrust of pedagogy.

The show at Art Chicago wasn’t the “art show” I was referring to at the beginning of this section, although it is certainly one to highlight. Actually the art show moment that played out like pedagogy was held the month after that, soon after the school year
had ended. My friend Alberto Aguilar and I curated a show at Cobalt Gallery in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago. We didn’t want to put on an object-oriented show and we didn’t want the show to just be professional artists. Alberto had been thinking about a phrase that is frequently seen in Mexican restaurants all around Chicago, *hecho en casa* (homemade), which refers to the fact that either the tortillas or the bread are made on the restaurant’s premises. Alberto and I began to discuss what that might mean in terms of our own work, which—for many years—has been about ideas of home, service, participation, do-it-yourself, and homemadeness. We wrote up an invitation email and sent it to about fifteen artists and non-artists that we wanted in the show, inviting them to come up with an event around these themes that could be enacted or performed at some point during the month of June at Cobalt Gallery. The “artists” for the show ranged from professional, internationally known practitioners to a seventh grader. Twelve of the artists we invited accepted our invitation and quickly sent us descriptors of what they were thinking about doing. A former colleague and great artist, Christopher Santiago, designed a foldout poster for the show and we were able to get it printed on sheets of newsprint from a downstate newspaper plant. The flyer had a charm that we felt was on par with what we intended for the show: a common show—something like the daily news—that could be attended by anyone and that didn’t necessarily “read” as art immediately. Appendix B is the images of the newsprint handout/poster, which folded out to 17 by 22 inches.

What happened over the month long series of events unfolded much like the graduate course I just described. Alberto and I set up some limited parameters and the artists, along with the public brought to fruition a series of unexpected moments of
contemporary practice as pedagogy. The following photo essay\textsuperscript{21} documents the project in chronological order. The show occurred over three weekends and included events in the mornings and in the evenings: a “house” party, a DIY home entertainment system, home-made weapon making workshop (see page 119 for clarification), homegrown knowledge workshop, get to know your local weeds workshop, make your own herbal candy workshop, parlor slide shows, piñata breaking, and several meals—prepared and served in the space.

\textsuperscript{21} Some of the text included in the following photo essay was taken from the original announcement flyer that was created for the exhibition. It is found in the appendixes of this document. All the photos, were taken by Jorge Lucero unless otherwise noted.
Artist and educator Christopher Santiago kicked off the month-long series of events by hosting a *House (dance) party* on the first Friday of the show. Open to the public, Santiago provided a DJ, a cooler full of water, and a strobe light. At this point in the exhibition's trajectory, no objects had been installed in the space. Santiago decorated the space with three strings of Christmas lights. Thumping music was had by all and dancing was done into the night. (Photo courtesy of Christopher B. Santiago).
The day after the house party every artist participating in the exhibition was invited to install an object or series of objects within the exhibition space. Contributions were encouraged to "not necessarily" be art objects. Some artists contributed unadulterated objects from their homes, some contributed art objects, and some contributed objects that troubled the definition of both the art and the everyday object. We called this event, which took the entire first Saturday of the exhibition, a day of "interior design" where we asked the artists to keep in mind "the ideas of 'home' introduced by this month-long series of events". Objects remained on display throughout the duration of the exhibition and were viewable when no scheduled event was occurring. Objects on display: restored furniture, spray painted lawn ornaments (pictured), local weeds, stacks of Vanity Fair magazines, photographs, an empty bottle of cologne, weapons made out of duct-tape, discarded slippers, a glass case full of toys, some folded clothes, a piece of luggage and a weather journal.
On the first Saturday morning of the exhibition Alberto Aguilar (pictured) opened up the exhibition space for a community pancake breakfast and Saturday morning cartoon viewing. Another event that was open to the public, this morning attracted participants of all ages. Episodes of the Nickelodeon cartoon *Avatar: The last airbender* where shown for all to enjoy while eating their pancakes made from scratch.
Immediately after the pancake breakfast, seventh-grader Madeleine led a duct-tape and cardboard dagger-making workshop. Tapping into her deep expertise and years worth of making various articles of defense (e.g. light sabers, utility belts and medieval-like weapons) with these home materials, Madeleine provided participants of various ages the opportunity to create their own cardboard and duct-tape daggers. Some of Madeleine's work was on display in the gallery for the duration of the exhibition.
The final event of the first weekend of *Hecho en Casa* saw the Cobalt Studio converted into a theatre. Chicago artists Bryan Saner and Teresa Pankratz demonstrated, constructed, and performed about and with a "homemade DIY home entertainment system". Using cardboard boxes and craft paper, inspired by toy theaters and shadow boxes, the event included both a lecture demonstration of how to make a DIY home entertainment system at home, followed by a ten-minute demonstration that was both moving and inspiring.
The second weekend of *Hecho en Casa* was opened up by Alberto Aguilar to all gallery visitors who wanted to collaborate in the making of a 50-ingredient mole. During the evening Aguilar discussed the history of mole with the participants, and created an accompanying sound piece with some of the mole-making participants. (Photo courtesy of Alberto Aguilar).
The same evening that the mole was made, artist Samuel Sotello-Avila invited members of the public to break his Minimalist Piñata. The silver-painted rectangular form was filled with candies identical to the one's found in Felix Gonzalez-Torres' famous Untitled (portrait of Ross in L.A.) of 1991. This event took place immediately outside of the Cobalt Studio and included both passerby and gallery attendees of all ages. (Photo courtesy of Alberto Aguilar).
Lisa Walcott concurrently performed a performance the evening of the mole making and piñata breaking. She created a sparse space full of gestures, scents, actions, sounds, spaces and materials all allusive to being home. Multiple batches of bread dough were made and then discarded into a swelling pile within the site-specific installation. Walcott’s frequent use of the theme of accumulation through repetitious and monotonous tasks especially relating to domestic space, were evident that evening and particularly the next morning when the dough’s yeast had not only exponentially expanded the pile of kneaded dough, but had also filled Cobalt Studio with defining scent of yeast at work.
On the second Saturday morning Jorge Lucero held a "school" or workshop that attempted to collect narratives of homegrown knowledge. Homegrown knowledge can be defined as learning that is produced, achieved, and examined outside of the context of institutional schooling. Lucero began the morning with a short lecture expanding the potential conversations that could occur around the idea of homegrown knowledge. After this the participants were given simple prompts that aimed to elicit personal narratives from the participants memories, which could later be shared during a conversation. After writing for about forty minutes the participants shared out some of their narratives and the conversation was recorded. The transcript of this conversation will be made into a book and PDF document that will be available for public examination. Amongst the stories that were shared that morning there was a woman who shared about her experience being homeschooled until she entered college; another woman who shared stories of her grandmother's plight as an immigrant worker and mother of seven; and yet another woman who had recently returned form a 26 month tenure with the Peace Corps in Benin, West Africa.
The evening of the second Saturday saw a guest list of fifteen people show up at Cobalt Studio to partake in a full dinner served by Alberto Aguilar, which included the mole that was communally prepared the previous evening. At this dinner Alberto and Sonia Aguilar served the meal, led the guest in table games, and gave some of the participants henna tattoos. A short film that Aguilar made with a group of seventh graders was also shown. At the conclusion of the evening, which included a dessert of *fresas con crema*, Aguilar gifted a small package to each attendee that evening. Among other things, the package contained an individual work of art created by Aguilar for each particular guest. (Photo courtesy of Michael J. Metts).
The same night that the mole dinner was served up, artist Hui-min Tsen presented a slideshow along the lines of a narrated vacation slideshow/armchair travel/after dinner parlor show. Instead of being a slideshow of an actual journey, though, it was more like a story of staying in one place and looking elsewhere. Tsen modeled her travels on the explorer Alexander von Humboldt by observing the weather and collecting data down by the lakefront near her home in Chicago. Interspersed with Tsen’s stationary travels were the stories of Alexander von Humboldt, who introduced the importance of working within a network of people communicating their findings in order to predict the weather. That evening Tsen also told the story of Elisha Kent Kane who was an avid follower of Humboldt’s method, went to explore the Arctic and reported back that he had found "the open polar sea," a warm region at the North Pole where the water never freezes. This presentation was actually shown on two separate nights: first for the mole dinner, then for Lynn and Santana's BlackXican Pozole dinner (see next image).
On the final Friday of Hecho en Casa Hermes Santana (who grew up in Pilsen) made a *BlackXican pozole*, while Gwenn-Aël Lynn served it in a performative way, emphasizing its olfactory dimension. Participants were invited to smell all the ingredients as part of the evening’s festivities (pictured). The dinner was sonified with the "Pilsen" soundscape. The conversation was rich and the food was delicious. A great time was had by all. (Photo courtesy of Gwenn-Aël Lynn).
Throughout the duration of the exhibition potted beautiful plants among the weeds of Chicago that Vanessa Smith had foraged for, accentuated the space. They became Cobalt's houseplants. On the closing Saturday of *Hecho en Casa*, Smith gave a tour of the weeds to the visitors, touching on the plants history, culinary and medical uses.
Following the weed/house plant demonstration, James Kubie closed out *Hecho en Casa* by leading a workshop on how to make herbal candies used in traditional southern folk medicine. Starting with whole ginger roots and bunches of horehound, participants processed botanicals to produce candies used to soothe the stomach and the lungs. All participants were able to take a portion of the candies home for their use. (Photo courtesy of James Kubie)
Temporary Close

At the beginning of an undergraduate art education methods course, which I also teach at the University of Illinois, I asked the students to perform Lygia Clark’s *Caminhando*, which is a set of directions that allows others to enact this work. First, the performer makes a Möbius strip out of a ribbon of paper. Then, using a scissors, the enactor makes a small cut somewhere along the ribbon’s center. The performer cuts following the ribbon, which as Möbius strips go, is continuous and never ending. At a given point, the performer reaches the beginning of their initial cut and needs to make a decision: will they cut to the left or to the right of the first cut? This is a trivial decision at first, however as the performer continues with the piece (and I saw this happen with a class of twenty-three students) their cutting slows and becomes much more methodical. There’s less talking in the room and the decision-making process becomes much more precarious. If they choose hastily, they might cut out of the border of the ribbon, ending the piece. What occurs in the performance of *Caminhando* is multi-fold. On the one hand there is an obvious metaphor of Pinar’s *currere*, meaning the idea of curriculum development as a means to incrementally discover, not just to enact prescribed lessons and to be able to do this continuously, like in the Möbius strip. As the student progresses along the Möbius Strip he or she is faced with decisions and their decisions have different—sometimes unexpected—consequences. Clark’s work allows the student who is enacting the work to experience what Lygia Clark experienced. Lisa Wainwright (2009) wrote about the act of “practicing Rauschenberg” (p. 116), or behaving in a manner reflective of Rauschenberg, and in a way, when a student enacts Clark’s *Caminhando* they are taking on this attitude of “practicing” Lygia Clark. The
emancipatory aspects of conceptual art practices such as these, which highlight difference, situtionality, and individual manifestations of constructed knowledge, allow for the works to stand out as pedagogical proposals and permissions for modes of operation within the pedagogical situation and the art situation. I gave the examples of the grad course I taught and the art show I co-curated with Alberto Aguilar as markers of how this occurs, and to show how this action, ultimately, promotes a type of diversity that is both ecologically sound, but also pedagogically robust and artistically fertile.

My proposal is that in order to create these diverse, robust, fertile and multiple centers—where participants are generative in their creative practice, initiate conviviality, and enact a social praxis—then many layers of predictability and completeness need to be restrained or maybe even forsaken by whomever is facilitating the experience (e.g. teacher, artist). Although some might find this proposal frightening, maybe even irresponsible, as a practicing artist, I find the idea of unpredictability and incompleteness incredibly in line with the integrity of my practice as an artist. I’m happy with the non-permanence of what I’m proposing since like Clark’s Möbius Strip piece described in 2003 by Thierry Davila, my teaching “exists only at the instant it is being made; it is nothing but time—the time of action—and relationship—the relationship between the paper medium and the person manipulating it” (p. 38).

I go into a classroom sometimes empty-handed, sometimes just barely holding on to what I’ve prepared for class that day. Sometime I come into the situation as I described in the graduate class and curatorial project above, with my hands and my expectations tied behind my back. I do this in order to limit the amount of “space” I have to make choices. I frequently have to wait to see what unfolds, occasionally abandoning plans for
a given class. The whole situation can become so precarious and frightening that I’m brought to prayer. I try to listen rather than speak, and I react to the education my students are affording me. I put the onus of teaching on everyone and everything in the classroom: on the temperament of the day, on some invented chance operations, on the weather, that day’s news, something I read during my lunch break, something some student said to me, an anecdote, a joke, a moment of boredom. I take my cues from the outside in honor of the humbling recognition that I am not alone, that I am dependent on God, family, nature, science, strangers, companions in learning, and all those who support that particular enterprise.
Chapter 3

One history of contemporary art practice as pedagogy
Latin American conceptual art

If we can establish that in art education—even inadvertently or without the ability to articulate its process—we look at artists’ works for permissions, we can begin to look at under-examined conceptual art trends in order to expend the possibilities of what can be done with this notion of contemporary art as pedagogy and pedagogy as contemporary art practice. I’m interested in the work of Latin American conceptual artist primarily because I identify as Latino, but most intriguingly because there are so many artists who have been making work on par, if not more potently, with some of the same conversations that have occupied the Euro-American art academies for decades now. It’s complicated though. Not only because it seems to imply that looking at whatever formal suggestions Latin American conceptual art makes is enough to open up those “permissions” for pedagogical use, but also because a typical content or context analysis of the work—although it may be historically and narratively accurate—still uses a methodological reference point, which is mostly anchored to the mainstream/ dominate art history, criticism, and pedagogy rubric. This approach to looking at the artworks and artists outside of the dominate discourse using the same methods of looking that doesn’t necessarily apply to works of art that were created and triggered by moments outside of that dominate discourse, skews how those works are perceived, learned from, responded to, and situated within the colonialis-t-affected art consciousness. So you can see how complex something like the construct of Latin American Conceptual Art might be as a category, let alone an actual subject to be examined. I thought about it and came to the conclusion that it’s not useful actually in this dissertation to try to define what “Latin American” is or means—since much like “American”—what “it is” cannot be situated
very succinctly and any attempts to do it seem to denigrate the one thing that can actually be attributed to something like the construct of Latin Americanism that is, that it isn’t one thing. Again, we are left with unpacking.

Latin American cultural producers from Jorge Luis Borges to George Lopez constantly bring to consciousness the reality of the Latin American condition, which is predominately, one of mestizaje, meaning mixture. From this point of the indescribable—yet inescapable mixture—we can work with an understanding that what I am identifying as Latin American, although the label makes it appear as if it is a succinct category, can be understood as too complex and nuanced to be captured within the scope of any single perspective, presentation, or volume. However, because the actual conversation around the manifold definition of Latin Americanism is at the core of what it actually might mean to be Latin American, then it can’t be helped that this chapter will also grapple with the question: *How do you define something that is in a constant state of hybridization?*

This “constant state of hybridization” is slightly different then the well theorized concept of the mestizo. The Mexican cultural theorist Nestor Gracia-Canclini makes a necessary difference between the hybrid per se (in its blended completion, such as the mestizo) and the process of hybridization. Garcia-Canclini says that these two concepts are two very different things. The hybrid—at least in terms of anthropology—Garcia-Canclini (2005) defines as a “socio-cultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects and practices” (p. xxv). By contrast the ongoing process of hybridization, can be aligned with a theory of “hybridization cycles” (p. xxv), which Garcia-Canclini attributes to anthropologist Brian Stross (1999). The hybridization cycles, according to Garcia-
Canclini is a formula through which “we move historically from more heterogeneous forms to other more homogeneous ones, and then to other relatively more heterogeneous forms, without any being ‘purely’ or simply homogeneous” (p. xxv). This constant flux, which Stross called “cycle of hybridity” and Garcia-Canelini merely identifies as “hybridization”, can be said to be at the core of the Latin American identity conversation. This is a personal conversation for me since I feel like I can always reinvent my Latin Americanism (more on this in chapter five and six) and that—in fact—involvement in contemporary art practice has been one of the main propellants of this continuous reinvention.

Something else is introduced here and I think that it makes some of my examples more relevant to a broader audience, particularly of art practitioners and pedagogues. It is what Renato Rosaldo—another anthropologist, Stanford University professor and the writer of the Foreword to the English translation of Garcia-Canelini’s germinal book Hybrid Cultures—said; Rosaldo states “hybridity can be understood as the ongoing condition of all human cultures, which contain no zones of purity because they undergo continuous processes of transculturation (two-way borrowing and lending between cultures)” (p. xv). In other worlds, Rosaldo posits Garcia-Canelini’s process of hybridization as something that is not particular to the Latin American, rather a state that is shared by “human cultures”, which presumably “undergo continuous… transculturation” voluntarily. The way that Rosaldo words this though leaves room for the interpretation that there may—in fact—be humans who purposefully avoid any conscious moments of “transculturation”.
In Rosaldo’s forward to *Hybrid Cultures* he makes it clear that Garcia-Canclini never “resolves the tension between the two conceptual poles of hybridity” (p. xvi). The two poles of hybridity that Rosaldo is referring to are—first—the one that can usually be attributed to biology, a complete fusion, of which humans are a biological example. And—second—the hybridity that he identifies as syncretism. To situate syncretism-hybridity as opposed to mere fusion Rosaldo uses the example of Catholicism as practiced in many parts of Latin America, where the Catholicism introduced by the colonizers is practiced in the colony through a form that is somewhere in between European Catholicism and the indigenous beliefs of that land’s first peoples.

This tension though, the one about the difference between the biological hybrid and the syncretized hybrid is actually one of the main proposals Latin American conceptual art can offer to the practice of pedagogy without trivializing the multifaceted integrity of either pedagogy or Latin American conceptual art. This is possible mainly because of the fact that the condition of being in a constant process of hybridization is situational and not specifically tied to an ethnic, post-colonialist, cultural, political or even pedagogical agenda or project. This anthropological recognition—that is, the one about the process of hybridization—would not have existed had it not been for the existence of the Latin American and that nebulous conversation that surrounds him or her. This is important because it offers up a look at the dominant, more privileged condition (the Euro-American one) through the methodologies and vocabulary of an alternative discourse. Being in the process of perpetual hybridization is a life task on par with my earlier conceptualization—through Levi-Strauss—of the bricoleur.
Remember that the definition of bricolage follows a conceptual model for the bricoleur that isn’t dependent on the aesthetic interplays of the collage elements (as is usually seen in paper collages), rather it foregrounds the very simple gesture of collating two or more separate sources to create a new entity—the bricolage gesture that is. This new entity doesn’t seek to hide or meld its separate components’ rather through the energy provoked from the individual components distinguished differences, the aggregate takes on a generative and provoking stance. This definition of the bricoleur makes room for performative gestures, acts of civic engagement, pedagogy, and everyday banalities to be a part of the lexicon of what might traditionally be accepted as collage. We see examples of this bricolage or hybrid sensibility in Latin American conceptual artists going as far back as the early 1920s with emergence of the Mexican cohort of poets, artists, and civil servants called *Los Estridentistas*.

Initiated by the poet Manuel Maples Arce, *Los Estridentistas* (which translates to The Stridentists) began through a propagandistic move that has become popularly known as “street art”. A manifesto—a call to “arms” if you will—was produced on “colored paper and pasted…on the walls of downtown Mexico City” (Rashkin, 2009, p.1) in 1921. In this poster Maples Arce called for the youth of Mexico City to look towards the future, to stop subscribing to the conservatism that dominated the academic, political, and social spheres of their lives and to instigate ruptures. Through these interruptive acts of “vandalism” Los Estridentistas, not unlike their European counterparts—meaning those who identified themselves with Futurism and Dada—were politically driven, enamored with modernity, and pushing for a celebration of innovation and the abandonment of conservatism in society, from the schools to the airwaves. There is a distinction though
between the European conceptual art origins of Futurism and Dada and the vanguard that emerged in various parts of Latin America, exemplified here by Los Estridentistas and later captured by similar “rebel” movements in Argentina and Brazil. Elissa Rashkin (2009) writes in her book about the group, “the avant-garde [of Latin America], although not isolated from European thought and cultural activity, emerged as a response to local conditions, and to a large extent, consciously broke with the colonial tradition of looking to Europe for intellectual leadership” (p. 3). In a separate essay, Rashkin tells the story of how many of the Estridentistas collaborated with the governor of Xalapa to not only make suggestions for utopian social engineering, but actually were active participants as judges, teachers, and officials who served in government positions (e.g. ministers of culture, judges, ambassadors). Through the governor’s collaboration with members of Los Estridentistas, especially Maples-Arce—who was considered his right-hand man—significant concrete changes came to and for the citizens of Xalapa. The projects—heavily focused on the industrial worker—included public spaces where locals could gather to either be entertained or just relax. The athletic stadium that was built in Xalapa still hosts events and now carries the name of Heriberto Jara-Corona, the governor who had formed this alliance with Los Estridentistas. Jara-Corona, the governor of Xalapa, came to that post after leaving his work in a factory, fighting in the Mexican revolutionary war, and subsequently being elected to his post as governor. His brief but inspiring collaboration with Los Estridentistas came to a close when other politicians who didn’t like his socialist policies ousted him from his post.

Rashkin’s sentiment that the development of Latin American conceptual art practices—especially Los Estridentistas—were independent of what the Futurists and
Dada artists were doing in Europe and much more civically engaged—having risen from the very concerns that caused the Mexican revolutionary war—is echoed by art critics, theorists, historians, and artists across Latin America. The Uruguayan conceptual artist Luis Camnitzer, arguably the most prolific theorist, historian, and critic of conceptual art practices coming from Latin America makes the same point as Rashkin. Except Camnitzer makes the differentiation between the center and the periphery much more pronounced in his argument. He positions the modes of working of European and American conceptual artists—mainly coming out of Paris and New York—as the center. According to Camnitzer Latin America was in the margins in relation to that center. Now, of course Camnitzer didn’t invent that, nor did he identify the center-margin relationship of which almost all Latin Americans—including the ones who live in the States—are intuitively aware. Many things including money, technology, violence, consumption, ideologies, and nationalism have contributed to perpetuating this inside/outside hierarchy that Camnitzer points to. Camnitzer states that it is actually the tendency of the center to compartmentalize and organize, and this instinct towards making order—or writing history—is what actually led to the category that we have come to know as “conceptual art”. Curiously, he identifies Western conceptual art as a specifically market oriented construct—in other words, what art historian’s Goldie and Schellekens call “big C conceptual art”. The idea of Conceptual Art with a capital “C” is an idea that European and American theorist are aware of, frequently distinguishing between the binding limitations of the term and artworks that could be consider conceptual, but not part of this formalized cannon. This condition has been magnified by the prominence of art education—at all levels—and its paradigm shifts towards art makers as constructors of
knowledge. Conceptual Art in the art centers is an art style—hence it can be taught—however Camnitzer (2007) said, “the periphery [meaning Latin Americans]…couldn’t have cared less about style and produced conceptualist strategies instead. These strategies were formally open ended and much more likely to be interdisciplinary” (p. 2), they were not a product, rather a mode of operation. It may be subtle here, but what Camnitzer is insinuating by positioning one form of conceptual practice as formalist (or about style) and the other more as a “strategy” (or way of being) is that one can be taught and the other can’t, at least not through that mimetic mode of working that is so typically Western.

It might be easy to say that the root of this different mode of producing conceptual works, which Camnitzer would identify as “conceptualism” or practicing conceptualism, was—and in many ways still is—provoked by this marginalization or victimization of the Latin American participant. But that would be putting to fine a point on it and would not recognize that many of the triggers for this type of work—again, didn’t come as a reaction to the art centers or art styles of the centers in Europe and the U.S.—rather came from a reaction to the local conditions of the people who perpetrated these works. In Xalapa it was the inertia of the Mexican Revolutionary War that provoked Los Estridentistas. In other Latin American countries—as I will talk about momentarily—there was a very real awareness that the proletariat had the power to affect change even against dictators (e.g. Argentina, Uruguay). And this is something else that can be brought into the conversation of what Latin American conceptual art practice brings to pedagogy, particularly a curriculum and pedagogy field that seeks to engage in issues of social justice. To put it plainly I’m suggesting that we look at the examples of
“local-ness” in Latin America that set off many of these acts of conceptualism as a means to make real dents in the larger social and pedagogical picture.

So up to this point we have four points. The first is that Latin Americanism is not one thing. The second is that the conversation around Latin Americanism proposes—even for non-Latin Americans—a model for constantly undergoing the process of hybridization. The third thing is that there is a difference between conceptual art and conceptualism; conceptualism coming as a result of a full engagement with the culture at large and not just reactionary to the forms of art. The fourth point that I spoke about so far is tied into this idea of being “fully engaged” with the culture at large and that is this idea of “local-ness”. The immediate and situationally specific concerns of individuals in whatever time and place they find themselves cannot be replaced with either an education, indoctrination, or practice that stands too far detached from the realities of everyday life.

Specifically, when speaking about many of the examples of Latin American conceptualism, we see the working class people of countries who have suffered political, social, and economic injustice—and who exist in an unnamable situation that can’t be called Modern, Post-Modern or even Pre-Modern. According to Gerardo Mosquera (1995) the condition—meaning the historically, technologically, and nationalistic condition of Latin America—is one of indeterminacy. At any given moment, we can take a sliver of the Latin American experience and it looks a lot like La Plaza de las Tres Culturas. La Plaza de las Tres Culturas is an intersection in Mexico City that bears the evidence of Mexico’s three most prominent identities: The Pre-Columbian Aztec Temple,
the sixteenth Century colonial church, and this 1964 housing complex reminiscent of the quintessentially modern International Style Architecture.

![Image of Plaza de las tres culturas](image)

**Fig. 1. Plaza de las tres culturas. Photo credit, creative commons.**

The condition, which I would like to point out is not always a condition of victimization or depravity. Actually it is a kind of transience, what Garcia-Canclini would call a move in and out or “entering and leaving” of post-modernity. This very special condition, scholars and artists through the Latin American identity have claimed as unique and directly associated with a very specific brand of social-justice-conceptual-art practice that aims at the local, yet has caused significant changes for all of Latin America. It is simultaneously local and expansive.
What artists from various Latin American identities consider to be their conceptual work and their definition of conceptual art can be really helpful to further understand what this very different approach to making work can offer the art educator who is interested in making their teaching practice their artistic practice and vice versa. This act of blurring the teaching practice with the artistic practice so that the moment of pedagogy is understood as contemporary art practice is an act based in “localism” that I propose unfolds as an emancipatory project for both the teacher and the artist to more palpably participate in each other’s civic and creative conversations.

Before giving some examples of Latin American artists’ MOs, I want to highlight an important similarity between conceptual art that follows the Western narrative and Latin American conceptualism. Most of the literature surrounding Latin American conceptual practices suffers from much of what the better-known instances of Western conceptual practices do. The burden of conceptual art and its struggle for perpetuity is that—frequently—its form dictates the conditions of its documentation. There is a lack of good documentation of many of the things that have happened in the past fifty-five years in conceptual art around the globe (see Farver, 1999). Of course, in many instances, this is by design since conceptual art is frequently driven by the notion that the idea is more important than the object of an artwork. This paradox often leads to either poor documentation or impossible moments to document.

Despite this lack of adequate visual documentation, there is plenty of written documentation about these works and the artists who produced them. A little bit of digging and an open imagination can help us to conjure up some of these conceptualist gestures in our imaginations. Many examples of Latin American conceptualism have an
aesthetic kinship to Western forms that I’ve cited previously (e.g. performance art, Minimalism, activism, installation art, relational aesthetics, emphasis on text, and earthworks). Beginning with that aesthetic frame of reference, it is not too difficult to come up with a list of prominent Latin American conceptual artists who—through a Euro-Amerocentric filter—can be easily categorized in the cannon of Western art’s discourse(s). Among them are the aforementioned Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco, the Brazilians Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica, the Chileans Alfredo Jaar and Gordon Matta-Clark, the Cuban (sometimes identified as Cuban-American) artists Ana Mendieta, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Coco Fusco, the Columbian sculptor Doris Salcedo, and the Chicano performance group Asco, with their most well known member Harry Gamboa, Jr.

The most well known of these “assimilated” practitioners, the Mexican/Chicano performance artist, writer, and activist Guillermo Gomez-Peña has gathered the type of Art World cache that has even had him delivering commentary over the airwaves of National Public Radio’s flagship news program All things considered. Having authored numerous books, performed worldwide with his performance troupe La Pocha Nostra, and given numerous lectures at art museums and universities around the world, Gomez-Peña is probably the most provocative and recognized Latin American artist at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Still, an integral part of his portfolio—a part that is related to his pedagogical MO—has gone under-recognized.

One year prior to writing this dissertation I was invited to make a contribution to a book about social justice and art education. I, as were many of the other contributors, was told which artist to write about in relation to the book’s overall theme. La Pocha Nostra—
the performance cohort of which Gomez-Pena is cofounder—was my assignment. At first I was hesitant to take on this task since I wasn’t sure I wanted to contribute to a text that codified what some artists do into formulaic projects or aesthetic molds that are easy for teachers to copy. Due to the openness of the invitation I imagined that I was being asked to contribute to a contemporary art curriculum “cookbook”, of which some very prominent examples already exist (Cahan and Kocur, 1996; Diamond and Hamlin, 2003; Hamlin and Donnan, 2007; Fusaro, Hamlin, Mayer, and Good, 2009), and which I didn’t wish to be a part of. Still, I knew that the intentions of the editors were good and that they only wanted to produce a text that was helpful to teachers.\footnote{Later, upon seeing the contributions of many of the other authors I recognized that the editors never intended a formulaic text, so I’m really glad I participated.} It helped that the editors of the compendium didn’t put any restrictions on the content of my contribution, which—to some degree—gave me creative control over my essay. At the same time I was already theorizing “mode of operation” and the invitation to contribute to this book seemed like a great opportunity to try out my theory with the work of an influential conceptual practitioner whose work I admired.

I began the assignment to write about La Pocha Nostra’s social justice leanings by taking the focus off the artists’ work and placing it on the artists’ mode of operation. This shift can be unsettling, particularly if the artist’s production and their mode of operation are hard to decipher. Nevertheless, whether this separation is clear or whether it needs to be identified, beginning the research project with this particular filter makes instances of the MO appear more readily. Doing the research for the essay through the MO filter, I came across an incredible interview with Gomez-Pena and his performance
partner Roberto Sifuentes where they describe a portion of their work that I had never heard of, non-performance activism or what they called “parallel activities” (Gómez-Peña, p. 185). I introduced the concept in my essay (see Appendix C for full essay) by stating that “some artists’ processes—particularly polyglots who work through multiple mediums and strategies—propose that we shift our pedagogical foci away from the production of art objects and language to an artist’s mode of operation and possibly even to an artist’s mere life practices” (Lucero, 2011). I was able to demonstrate something that Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes did that fell outside of the boundaries of the art productions that people know them for and was more oriented to everyday behaviors that—actually—could be imitated, if not in form, than in spirit. Gómez-Peña (2000) said in this interview, “half of the work [we] do is in the civic realm rather than in the art world, but it goes unnoticed …the art world is simply not interested in these other activities” (p. 185). This passage and his description of how members of La Pocha Nostra did this opened up the opportunity for me to show how Gómez-Peña “points out that these acts of direct activism—such as affiliating themselves with the Farm Labor Organizing Committee—are perceived by the art world as ‘parallel activities’ to La Pocha Nostra’s ‘real’ work. These ‘parallel activities’ magnify an aspect of La Pocha Nostra’s practice that is difficult to codify for curriculum development because ‘mere life’ is situational, personal, palimpsestic and often times inarticulatable” (Lucero, 2011). I made a reference in the essay to La Pocha Nostra’s performance art work, but stressed that it was this “parallel” work that contextualized their performance work in a way that could actually be used—borrowed from—in order to achieve social justice art education that is actually relevant to the stakeholders of a specific pedagogical moment.
Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra’s popularity aside, there is something to be noted about the lack of attention their MO—and that of many other Latin American conceptual artists—get. I would argue that these artists have received less attention in the Euro-American art consciousness because of their state of perpetual hybridization, which not only manifest itself in their personal and ethnic identities, but also in the manner that this permeates their artistic MOs. This process of hybridization—I believe—makes their work less marketable, due to the simple fact that sometimes the work is hard to pigeonhole and also frequently falls outside of the parameters of what might even be considered art. To me it seems like this problem lends itself to a wonderful new opportunity—which granted is not wholly specific to Latin American conceptual artists—and that is the possibility of placing these artists’ polyglot and parallel practices under the permissions-scrutiny that lends itself to the discovery of MOs that are simultaneously pedagogical and art-like.

Francis Alýs

The Belgian-born Mexican artist Francis Alýs can serve as a warm-up example for our Latin American MO investigations. The first thing that can be said about Alýs is that most of his video works are on-line and downloadable for free. The videos are striking in their homemade, lo-fi quality but also in their ability to invoke the sublime through their slowness or non-eventfulness. You don’t watch an Alýs video to witness the documentation of a work, nor to see an aesthetic representation of an event, you watch the videos the way you would look at a photograph—for a few seconds or so—until you feel like you’ve had enough and then you move on to the next one. There’s no animosity there, the videos simply are what they are. Through his videos Alýs doesn’t come off as a
provocateur. In this way I feel like Alýs’ works are very trusting. The artist through his works seems to trust, not only in the potential of the work itself, but also in humanity. Again, not that humanity will always do the right thing, but that given enough to grab onto human’s will allow their curiosity to take them into places that appear uneventful, foreign, and even scary.

A work coordinated by Alýs called When Faith Moves Mountains demonstrates some of these characteristics. It was an event carried out by the artist in collaboration with Cuauhtémoc Medina and Rafael Ortega in Lima, Peru. Five hundred students were asked to volunteer to move a five hundred meter sand dune ten centimeters. The students were recruited from two universities in Lima and were explained the process outright. As ridiculous as the proposal seemed many students seemed to take it as a point of pride, not only to commit themselves to the project’s completion, but also to recruit their friends for the project. In a video documenting the process students are interviewed about their experiences with the performance piece before, during, and after the event. It is amazing to see the type of spiritual significance the students come to place on this—seemingly menial—task. The students reflect on the context of what they are doing in terms of what it means for the poor communities that are near where the performance is taking place, they bring up questions about work ethic, migrant workers, art, and collaboration. Overall it appears that the change that the students were asked to perform caused a type of internal change in them as participants.

Pedagogically speaking we see the metaphor here that is reiterated continuously in situations—such as schools—where the insurmountable task is often engaged with a lack of consciousness of how the beginning is linked to the end. Again, the teacher and
the student engage in this back and forth that appears to be labor without an end in sight, with no visible value, and worse, bound to be destroyed or reversed by the passage of time and the lack of daily engagement. Yet the participants of When faith moves mountains persevered. They enacted the work, knowing that in the end the only evidence of the work would exist in those who partook in its making, and only to the level at which each participant committed themselves to the task.

**Luis Camnitzer**

Luis Camnitzer, 71 at the time that I was writing this dissertation, and enjoying two major museum shows—one in El Museo del Barrio in New York and one at the Kemper Art Museum in St. Louis—has become a key figure for me in the unpacking of this Latin American conceptual art legacy. I struggle to figure out whether it has taken the American art world this long to mount shows around the work of this very important, international artist because the work was not showable or because Camnitzer has been so unabashedly outspoken about the realities of the Euro-American centered Art World/market. In other words, has the Art World not given Camnitzer his due out of spite? Or is it just because—in the end—the work is too out of sync with the clean story of Western art history that—as I mentioned before—the art historian Jim Elkins suggest is one of the driving forces behind where the Art World shines its spotlight.

Camnitzer, a German born Uruguayan conceptual artist, art critic, and theoretician whose writings have literally situated the conversation around the conceptual art practices of Latin America for an English-speaking audience has lived exiled in New York for the better part of his life. His work consists of political gestures and ambiguous acts of
whimsy that are meant to denote instances of flat out rebellion. They’re provocative not just because they challenge aesthetic paradigms but also because they confront the viewer with his politics. Camnitzer’s art sometimes goes to the limits of conceptualism in many ways taking a swipe at the question Lucy Lippard and John Chandler (1968/1999) spoke in regards to dematerialization: “we still do not know how much less ‘nothing’ can be” (p. 50). Camnitzer’s use of text (typical of many famous works of conceptual art) without trying to be coy, funny, or even smart, in its bare-bone-ness confronts the marketability of his work by being unmarketable. One work—a plaque—simply reads, “This is a mirror, you are a written sentence”. If the artwork is literally nothing more then a written sentence, black letters on white background; and if I use art as a mirror—of pedagogy, of emotion, for revelation, or whatever—then it must be true that I am—in fact—“a written sentence”. Another work by Camnitzer says the word “horizon” but with the bottom of every letter missing, as if the word was dipping behind the horizon line.

One particularly famous/infamous work deals directly with the market conditions that Camnitzer’s been battling in the Art World. In Self Service (1996/2010) Camnitzer stacks a pile of his prints in the gallery, unsigned. Next to the stacks is a rubber stamp that the consumer can use to print Camnitzer’s signature onto the print that can be had for free. The sheets have a singular line of text in the center, such as “One signature is an action, two signatures are a transaction” and “the soul of art lives in the signature”.

For Camnitzer standing up to the power of the art market is something that he has been able to sustain primarily because he has sustained his practice all these years as a teacher and as an author. Camnitzer has stated "that art and education are the same and only taking form in different media (p. 36). This permission to practice ones pedagogy as
a work of conceptualism has afforded Camnitzer the opportunity to continue to make his work without the pressures of the art market. This art market pressure, with its emphasis on the product is not unlike the pressure to produce that art teachers have when working with their students, but also when thinking about their own studio practice. A simultaneous practice such as the one Camnitzer models—based in conceptualism and inclusive of ones’ teaching practice—can help in the further emancipation of the art teacher who may feel frustrated using all their best energy for their teaching practice.

There’s no mistake about it, Camnitzer sees art forms that can be transformative as engaged in the social sphere in actuality, not just in theory. He makes a note of bringing up a scrap of paper that he recently found, which he had scribbled on about forty years ago the fragment “Dada-Situationism-Tupamaros-Conceptualism” (p. 3). The standout term here is obviously Tupamaros, not just because it is not in line with the Western story of art, but also because the Tupamaros in Uruguay were a leftist guerilla group of activists that eventually—do to out-of-control growth and mismanagement—found themselves in violent conflicts with the government that they were resisting in the early 1970s. They are a controversial group because—on many levels—they are held up as heroes of resistance even though at a given point certain individuals in the group partook in conduct that—under today’s rhetoric—could be described as bordering on terrorism. The reason that they are seen as heroes is because their clearly laid out intentions positioned the group as what has been frequently described as a “robin hood” type of group, stealing from the rich in order to give to the poor. Their methods were aesthetic on many levels and highly influential to artists such as Camnitzer who drew a direct link between a certain kind of Modernism, the Tupamaros gestures of resistance,
and his own conceptual art practice. Uruguay’s current president is a former Tupamaro
and there is an offshoot group of resistors in Venezuela, who more blatantly align
themselves with the practices of some extremist groups in the Middle East and other parts
of the world. Camnitzer doesn’t make mention of the offshoot Tupamaros in Venezuela
since they are obviously concerned with something wholly different than what the
Uruguayan Tupamaros were after. Camnitzer stated that,

The urban guerilla functions in conditions very similar to those with which
the traditional artist is confronted when he is about to produce a work.
There is a common goal: to communicate a message and at the same time
to change with the process the conditions in which the public finds itself.
There is a similar search to find the exact amount of originality that, using
the known as a background, allows him to stress the message to the point
of notoriety, sometimes signaling toward the unknown. But by going from
the object to the situation, from the elitist legality to subversion, new
elements appear. The public consumer suddenly has to participate actively
to be a part of the situation. (p. 13-14)

Camnitzer called the Tupamaros strategies “active aesthetics” comparing
some of their tactics and strategies to “theatre”, pointing out that before the
Tupamaros created a disruption they rehearsed and even had “understudies” in
case something went wrong—and it frequently did. Camnitzer states that the
Uruguayan public was sympathetic of the Tupamaros efforts. I have to admit that
I am still trying to read between the lines of what Camnitzer is proposing, since to
me it appears that the real difficulty with seeing the Tupamaros as “active
aesthetics” is that I cannot ignore the fact that people died directly because of some of the Tupamaros actions. For now I can only quote Camnitzer with one of the more provocative things he had to say about the Tupamaros campaign. He said, “the line separating liberating activities from crime, always blurred by changing definitions of legality, was even more confusing under dictatorship” (p. 57). Camnitzer doesn’t say this to excuse the actions of the Tupamaros, rather he states this with the intent of creating a moment of suspension in my immediate judgment that would allow me to see what the Tupamaros did as something spectacular, aesthetic, and ultimately a tangible change agent.

Oscar Bony

Oscar Bony, who later in his life went on to document through photography developments in Argentina’s burgeoning rock and roll scene, early on in his career created one of the more sensational works of Latin American conceptualism. Part performance, part conceptual art, Bony paid a working family of three, double their daily salary to be on “display” during the duration of an exhibition. That was in 1968, years before Gilbert and George’s living sculptures—who incidentally were commenting on their own condition, that of being participants in Art World market subtleties that ultimately only concern a very small portion of the public—if any. Bony’s work, La Familia Obrera, wasn’t able to run the course of the exhibition as the entire show needed to close due to another piece that apparently took some shots at the government. Again, as in the case of many Latin American’s making art, Bony saw himself forced to make a choice between personal integrity and sustenance. Bony didn’t make work for seven years after the incident and later—as I mentioned—returned to take pictures of famous
rock musicians. Bony’s contribution to the conceptual landscape is minimal, but given the content of the work and the type of legendary status that kind of work accumulates over time, it is important to make mention of his work here. By putting on “display” an actual working family, Bony presented, not just the reality of art and life’s blurring, but more interestingly the blurring of the proletariat with—the sometimes undetectable—pretensions of art.

Later in his life Bony would return, after having been in exile in Spain, to making photographs that reintroduced ideas of this type of workingman conceptualism into his photography. Perhaps as a nod to Chris Burden’s germinal performance of having himself shot at short range in the arm by a friend, Bony takes self-portraits and after having framed them proceeds to shoot them with a gun causing fractures and splits in the glass that are reminiscent of Duchamp’s large glass. Except in this particular case, what Bony ends up with is a reference that he is frequently cited as making to his personal seven year furlough from making art as a type of artistic “suicide” (a shooting of the self), a conceptual gesture—anchored in its manipulation of time’s materiality—through its pause of public artistic activity as a last ditch effort to change the governmental circumstances that the people of Argentina were going through during the sixties and seventies. The seven-year pause was in many ways an act of desperation, an act that Bony seems to not be able to live down even after reemerging in Argentina’s art scene with these mutilated photographic images.

I want to stress what I’m saying here so that it doesn’t get lost. Oscar Bony stopped making art for seven years as a protest to his government’s dictatorship. Seven
years, to me seems like it started—not as an art project—but an indefinite moratorium based on hopelessness, which took Bony seven years to recover from.

**Maris Bustamante**

Maris Bustamante, a professor, art historian, and critic also makes performances. In the work that I am going to describe now, we see Bustamante sending out well wishes—albeit, tongue-in-cheek—to the various political parties that have governed contemporary Mexico. In a mixture of poetry and anecdotes Bustamante subverts the show and tell nature of school presentations and magic shows in order to send a not too ambivalent letter to those who “run” Mexico.

The 2006 performance *Cuerpo y politica en Mexico* (Body and Politic in Mexico) looks at first glance, as if it is happening in front of an audience. Watching the video I got the feeling that the performance was made specifically for the video. The first shot opens with a spotlight. Bustamante stands at the top of edge of the where the spotlight is hitting the floor; if she took one step back she’d be in darkness. To her right is a music stand; she looks to it occasionally. We see Bustamante wearing a series of foam circles around her torso, looking like a turtle with her shell on backwards. The “turtle shell” is zebra-striped and Bustamante is wearing all black so that her breast plate/turtle shell is highly contrasted. It cannot be ignored.

She pontificates towards the audience/me, “pay attention, because it is not the same to look as to observe”. She points to her eye like a badass grandmother warning you to “watch out”. Bustamante removes the first circle and we hear the Velcro tear revealing how this breastplate is being held together. Everything she says is in Spanish. She
declares that Mexico is no longer called Mexico but rather it is now called “an Oreo Cookie”. She stands there with an enormous Oreo cookie stuck to her chest, proudly. She then removes the Oreo part of the breastplate only to reveal a large salted pretzel underneath. The pretzel is slightly larger than her head and looks like a prop-comic’s bad punch line. No one’s laughing. Bustamante then tells the story of when president George W. Bush choked on a pretzel while watching football and passed out. She pretends to choke and then drops the pretzel. I can’t tell if she’s making fun or illustrating her narrative. Underneath the pretzel Bustamante reveals the logo for one of the two main political parties in Mexico, el PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). She then dedicates a poem written by one of Mexico’s most important literary figures, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, to the PRI. Sor Juana, a nun who is considered one of the first Mexican writers is a figure so revered in Mexico she appears on the two-hundred-peso bill. “Las palabras de Sor Juana: To have patriotic zeal, one only needs to have the fear of having it, who’s already feeling the damage of the one who is feeling the risk” (Ines de la Cruz, 1725, p. 28).

Bustamante opens up a bunched-up silky Mexican flag that she had in her pocket only to let fall out a slew of plastic toy bugs. Startled, Bustamante reaches behind the PRI logo and says, “fucking pests! Some of them have gotten out, but there is still some remaining. We have to look for them, because there still remains too many fucking pests”

Bustamante opens up the flap where the PRI sign is to reveal the logo of the other major political party, The PAN, Partido Accion Nacional, (National Action Party). Unlike the Oreo cookie and the pretzel, the PRI logo does not drop to the floor. The PRI logo stays open and at this point we can see that an assistant needs to hold up part of the
costume as it is forming a different shape and has revealed on its inside two words, Porros and Narcos, meaning Joint (as in Marijuana) and Narco-traffickers respectively. She then gives the PAN some of Sor Juana’s poetry, too. She says, “It’s not to offend what I adore. Actually it is of high esteem to think that everyone should adore, what I want” (Ines de la Cruz, 1709, p. 28).

With the same degree of reverence that Bustamante has kept through the entire performance, she opens up the other flap and shows us two more words, Yupis and Virreyes, meaning yuppies and vice-lords. She says in Spanish, “these used to screw me over but now they make me cry”. She spills—out of another silk flag (looks like Guatemala)—rocks, jewels or candy (it’s hard to tell). They splatter with a rattle all over the spotlight’s circle. In her center is the logo for yet a third political party, the PRD. The PRD is a relatively new political party that aligns itself with socialism. Again, words from Sor Juana, “Whoever has enemies tends to say that he isn’t sleepy. Because how do you calm down someone who is so sure. Who on an enemy front carelessly takes to bed, just wants to be—on the contrary—a trophy. Who wants to usurp my sayings? Who wants to win me the prize and who in soul competitions wants to be more well set?” (Ines de la Cruz, 1714, p. 33).

She then says, “aye PRD” or “Oh my, PRD”, and then drops the final flap which consequently makes the form of a cross. She says, with exhaustion “Pomada de la Campana” as she reveals the logo for this traditional Mexican balm people use for pain, swelling, scrapes and other accidents (a virtual cure-all that I remember from my own childhood). She exclaims:
WE WANT BLOOD WE WANT BLOOD WE WANT BLOOD, BLOOD, BLOOD. WE WANT BLOOD, BUT NOT OUR OWN. WE WANT BLOOD WE WANT BLOOD. BLOOD. POMADA DE LA CAMPANA. BLOOD, BUT THE BLOOD OF OTHERS. WE WANT BLOOD, BUT THE BLOOD OF OTHERS. (Bustamante, 2006).

As she is saying this, her assistants have placed a vibrant green cactus paddle wreath made out of foam on her head and she begins to drip something that is meant to look like blood. She drops her head in the way Christ is usually represented after having breathed his last breath on the cross. The music comes up and the camera pans back. No applause is heard.

These types of jabs at the corrupt politics of Mexico are infused with both humor—maybe satire—and real pain. From the use of the plastic bugs and the foam, cartoon-like costume, to the cactus crown on her head, what we see playing out here is a concern for the theatricality of the happening that is not anchored to concerns about full understanding on behalf of the audience. Yet there is no hiding that whatever the jab is, it is direct and aimed at the political parties of the country, not holding back while pointing out what infestation of corruption has overtaken Mexico, a wave of Narco-trafficking related violence and addiction. The whole performance crescendos from a trajectory that involves a lot of playfulness but ultimately is not funny. Like the crying clown there is an utter contradiction in what is being put forth and what is being said.

In the United States we have a saying for a Mexican who tries to hide his affiliation with Mexico. We say, “they try to hid it, but they have the cactus paddle or
“nopal” smack dab on their forehead”. The very thing which is supposed to be the marker of every Mexican—the proverbial cactus paddle on the forehead—ends up being the last station of Bustamante’s passion play which ends with a proclamation for blood, but not ours—that of the other.

James Scott (1985) identifies this type of joke-laden seriousness as “weapons of the weak” against all forms of hegemony.

By reference to the culture that peasants fashion from their experience—their “offstage” comments and conversations, their proverbs, folksongs, and history, legends, jokes, language, ritual, and religion—it should be possible to determine to what degree, and in what ways, peasants actually accept the social order propagated by elites. (p. 41)

And Maris Bustamante presents a mode of operation here that can—certainly be seen in all sorts of American satire (e.g. The Onion, South Park, Saturday Night Live)—but rarely have I ever seen it in a way that is purposefully not funny.

**Leon Ferrari**

Leon Ferrari is another Argentinean who began as a ceramicists and sculptor. After developing a method for making conceptual drawings—and also in part because of the US role in the Vietnam war—Ferrari found himself making loaded collages and ready-mades which gained him quite a bit of attention. His works became known, not only because of the censorship much of his work has confronted, but also because of his polyglot practice that includes everything from making films, works of ceramic, collages, drawings, and sculptures. Like Camnitzer and Bustamante, Ferrari is not defined by his
medium—again, making him less marketable—however, accentuating his MO for purposes of pedagogical investigations such as this one.

One method of working that Ferrari came up with was something he referred to as *Babelism*. He titled this MO after the “collaborative method” told about in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. The narrative of the Tower of Babel follows the ambitious plans of the “whole earth’s” people to conduct what could be interpreted as a pedagogical and contemporary art project. In Genesis chapter 11 the conjurers of the tower’s concept had two purposes in mind, to reach the heavens and to make a name for themselves. The story also tells that when God saw this happening he confounded their languages so that their inability to communicate would stop their plan. In truth, the story doesn’t say anything about why God wanted to stop them other than a surprise on God’s behalf at the people’s unity and ingenuity; “And the LORD said, “Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them” (Genesis 11:6, NKJV). Whether this is narrative that celebrates heterogeneity or demonstrates God’s recognition of human’s threatening potential, what Ferrari demonstrates is the process’s overlay with Surrealist MOs like the exquisite corpse.

*Babelism* was essentially an exquisite corpse process, although instead of the components being created independently, Ferrari (1964/2006) encouraged his participants to construct a “torre de Babel” by “one person who puts the tower together with things from others, or better yet, make it among all of us, crossing each other, covering each other… all of us together working…without looking at what the other is doing” (p. 398).
Later when the political oppression in Argentina began to escalate, Ferrari started making collages with newspaper clippings, which detail the crimes of the military junta in Argentina led by Jorge Rafael Videla in 1976. The works called *Nosotros no sabiamos* (*We didn’t know*) were the most direct collages you can imagine. The newspaper clippings were taken and without further manipulation pasted on larger pieces of paper. This gesture seemed to insinuate that Ferrari didn’t want to get in the way of what he was presenting by bringing any level of decoration to the clippings. However, that didn’t mean that the effect of the clippings wasn’t aesthetic. Since there were so many clippings, and since they were all juxtaposed alongside each other, instead of buried amongst sports, quotidian news, entertainment, advertisements, and gossip.

That same year following Ferrari’s participation in the central political art event in Argentina, *Tucaman Arde*, he fled to Brazil with his family. Ferrari, now an exile who had run afoul of the Argentinean dictatorship was dealt the tremendous blow when he found out that his son, Ariel, suffered the same terrible fate of being one of the many *desaparecidos*, which the newspaper clippings in *Nosotros no sabiamos* demonstrated. It should be noted that it wasn’t until his exile, at age 57, that Ferrari considered his art processes a “professional” activity. Prior to that, when questioned whether what he was doing was art or not, Ferrari would simply answer that he, “was not worried about the fact that they were art-works or not, he just wanted to express his ideas regarding the Western world as efficiently as possible” (Ferrari cited in [http://www.leonferrari.com.ar/index.php/?bio/](http://www.leonferrari.com.ar/index.php/?bio/), retrieved August 1, 2011). This theme of knowing and not knowing, or turning away from crimes that don’t affect certain aspects of the population—which is demonstrated in Ferrari’s news clipping piece—is repeated
over and over again in Ferrari’s work either in his treatment of the Holocaust, American political and economic policies, or the Catholic Church’s corruption. To this day, Ferrari continues to aggressively campaign against injustice through his many art forms.

Curiously enough—while in exile—Ferrari made some more abstract—not easily identified as political—works. He credited the “sweet, free thinking, and unprejudiced” people of Brazil for this shift in his work. This is an interesting point because it buttresses some of what Camnitzer claims as different motives for producing the kinds of conceptualism that emerged in different parts of politically oppressed Latin America.

Ferrari’s work shows a distinct change from the time before and after he arrived in Brazil. Another type of work, architecture-like drawings that attempt to mimic or capture some of Sao Paulo’s robust traffic of inhabitants, become Ferrari’s main output. The works appear to be mind-maps, but they capture the duel nature of chaos and order that mark large cities such as Sao Paulo.

**Is there a Latin American MO though?**

What are the proposals that the art of artists who identify with Latin America offer to art education? I could tell you something fancy, which may or may not be true. I could say that Latin American conceptualism offers interstices, hybridization, examples of resistance to Racism, Imperialism, elitism, poverty, oppression, marginalization, loss of identity or pigeon-holing of identity. Resistance to being told what you are or what you have to be. I could tell you that it highlights heterogeneity, the pursuance of social justice, challenges to hegemony, and it opens up conversation. I could say that it gives the silenced a voice. Drawn from the theories of Nestor Garcia Canclini we can see that the
idea of hybridization has not only been occurring in Latin America for some time now, it
takes place outside of the realm of the production of culture and also identifies with the very-
clean, frequently cited notion of the hybrid moment as some kind of reciprocal moment
of integration. That’s not what it is though. I’m not suggesting that anything that is found
in the Latin American conceptualism lexicon should be “appropriated”, rather what is
proposed is more in-line with Levinas’s ideas of the “other” and how one “other” calls
out to another “other”, but they never lose themselves or give themselves away. They are
all those things separately and mixed simultaneously and their material representations
reflect—as well as trouble—that.
Chapter 4

My years on Goat Island
I’ve been looking at artists’ MOs since before I ever thought about becoming a teacher. At the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), where I did my undergraduate studies, our daily task was to imitate. “Go talk to some of those dead guys”, a painting teacher would say referring to the enormous collection of artifacts that lay just a short saunter away from my painting studio. Since SAIC is an art school that is directly attached to its art museum it was easy to just put my paintbrush down, pick up my sketchbook and walk over to see a multitude of MOs made manifest through art objects. For me, looking at an artist’s gesture, whether it was made with paint and fabric (e.g. Sigmar Polke) or whether it was how they ate a cheeseburger (e.g. Andy Warhol), quickly became my main source of education. In my mind I would ask, “How’d they do that?” Followed by another equally simple—however logical—query, “Why’d they do that?”

A year after finishing my studio studies, after having received an enticing letter explaining that I could be certified to teach in Illinois by SAIC in just one year, I was thinking less about my teachers and more about artists, in particular artist who took me from the initial “how” question to the secondary, “why” question. In part—as a mode of resisting the stereotypes thrust upon art teachers—I took it upon myself to look at artists, not teachers, for my modes of operation as a teacher. During my second year of teaching at Northside College Prep I was introduced to C.J. Mitchell, the company manager for the performance group Goat Island, a now defunct artist collaborative that made nine performances over twenty years.

Before talking about this encounter with C.J. though, let me say something about Goat Island and in particular one of its founders, Matthew Goulish. Goat Island was, as
much as can be witnessed with the naked eye, a multi-person performance collaborative made up of five performing members, one director, a company manager, a woman who helped make films, a fashion designer who made outfits as costumes for the group, some interns, and a selected rotating group of invited writers and contributors. Goat Island would spend two years making each performance.

Several members of Goat Island taught at SAIC, Matthew being one of them. The two courses that I took with Matthew were called The study of anything and The art of crossing the street. The content of the two courses, which were catalogued under Liberal Arts, was actually research form. Although the courses were not studio courses, it is arguable that what we were taught by Matthew was strategies of living. Again, neither course was a studio course—they both examined research strategies—however it always seemed like we were making something. It’s true, there are no objects that remain from those courses, but the “things” that we were making were—not unlike Francis Alÿs’ moved mountain—“things” that we were making inside of ourselves, changes in personal modes of operation. Matthew’s mode of operation in helping us to expand our own modes of operation was one of the principle strategies that I appropriated while teaching in Northside College Prep’s colloquium program.

Northside College Prep was the high school where I taught art for seven years prior to beginning my PhD studies. At Northside College Prep we had a very currere friendly course schedule. We had a block schedule, which allowed courses to be taught in longer blocks of time and this opened up the opportunity for more experimental curricular approaches. One of the hallmarks of this type of schedule—what we called
“colloquium”—was a day in the middle of the week when no “regular” classes were held, instead allowing for a highly creative time slot where a teacher could teach almost anything they wanted to. Teachers would invent courses and then those courses would be placed in a catalogue that every student could then pick their colloquium from. The course met for three hours—much like a college course—and didn’t have to concentrate on the teacher’s particular field of expertise. English teachers taught cooking classes; information technology teachers taught motorcycle maintenance; social science teachers created public mosaic murals; game, film, and music theory was taught by curious faculty; a German teacher consistently used field trips to discover everything from Chicago’s architecture to the city’s public transit system. Faculty, administration, parents, and students alike, touted colloquium, as arguable one of the most engaging and interdisciplinary offerings at the school.

When colloquium sessions were over, school was over and students could either hang out at the school or go home. Art students tended to hang out in the studios since our classrooms were always open for work and socializing. Frequently, my colloquium sessions would go over the three-hour limit since during that time it was also recommended that teachers take field trips. I always took the opportunity of colloquium to invent courses that could on some level capture what Matthew Goulish had done in his SAIC seminars, a class that wasn’t necessarily an art class, but still felt like you were making something. I would create my classes around research themes (e.g. love, failure, surrealism, writing). It was my description for “F”, a colloquium around the ideas of failure that caught C.J. Mitchell’s eye.
As I mentioned above C.J. was Goat Island’s company manager and he knew that Matthew had taught a course at SAIC around these same ideas of “failure”. Now, this was a course I never took at SAIC, but the ideas surrounding it were so intriguing to me that I figured I’d take it on as a research/ pedagogy project also. When C.J. was introduced to me he asked me if I had ever heard of Matthew Goulish. Intrigued, I responded that “of course I had” and told C.J. that Matthew had been my teacher at SAIC. This seemed to make a light bulb go off above C.J.’s head. He asked if I’d be interested in collaborating with Goat Island on an educational project. I said, “yes.”

How we got from point A to point Z is another story, which I’m afraid would derail me from the point I’m trying to get to, but I will say this, the relationship that my students and I developed with Goat Island was transformative. It wasn’t Goat Island’s work necessarily; it was their mode of operation. Yes, of course, their worked revealed aspects of their MO, but it was their openness to our presence amongst them that really opened up new streams of pedagogical thought for my teaching and art practice(s).

When one visits Goat Island’s web page one is greeted with the slogan; “We have discovered a performance by making it.” This initially seems redundant and/or simple, but do not be fooled, it is in fact redundant and overwhelmingly simple. This is the simultaneous repulsion and lure of Goat Island. On the one hand, Goat Island’s lack of pretension, and genuine interest in the wonderment of life’s banalities is both freeing and enlightening, however these non-prejudicial, investigatory strategies are many times suspect because of their incomprehensible inactivity (e.g. slowness, repetitiveness, or boredom), lo-fi collage sensibility, impermanence, and resistance to easy classification.
Goat Island’s work is about its participants. All who engage in the work: both, performer and perceiver are responsible for the content of the work. This is a very difficult proposition considering the challenge Goat Island’s formal delivery may present to a viewer unfamiliar with the troupe’s vocabulary and working methodology. Their poetic lexicon I can temporarily summarize with these three directions, which are inferred to the “active participant”/audience member and even to the performers themselves:

1. Do the thing you do from slow to still.

2. Place this thing next to that thing. Fold it. Hold it up to the light. Look at it.
   Don’t think about it. Think about it all the time.

3. Repeat until dead.

For example, during a presentation of a work-in-progress that my students and I attended, the five performing members of the group spent the first twenty-five minutes of the work repeating, not exactly in unison and not exactly in rounds, the same 39 body movements. It was a series of dances. It was a series of lectures. Some of those movements were:

1. Bend over with your right leg stretched taught so that your head and toe are seeing each other; swing your arm to the beat of a metronome like a stiff pendulum to simulate a precise cutting motion

2. Throw yourself on the ground as if you’re having a seizure, shake for a strategic amount of time, trying to control your flailing and your breathing.
3. With all your heart, place your right hand over your sternum. Mutter a phrase in Croatian.

4. Tap the ground so softly, as if you were patting the dirt around a newly planted fruit tree, repeat it several times so the noise becomes music.

5. Extend both of your arms away from your torso; rock side-to-side like a piston or other well lubricated mechanism that goes in and out.

Goat Island is a mimic of the invisible and ignored of the world. As one can witness in the work of the group, one can see the ambiguity of words, of objects, of logic, of history, of the body. One will find the concreteness of relationships honing, of educated guesses, of confidence in failure, of true democracy. All of this you might find and lose in cyclical structures, absurd repetition, and random acts of bricolage. You may stumble upon it via singing, via falling, over lunch, in the exchange of gifts or secrets. You might find that it’s compassion, that it’s nonsense, that it’s some kind of wonderment. And it is.

Goat Island as a pedagogical model is a microscope or a magnifying glass. They are a parent’s genuinely surprised realization that this thing, which their child is seeing for the first time, is equally new to the parent. They execute respect for material. As Matthew Goulish (2000) would say, “in the sense of the word’s original Latin meaning, ‘to look twice.’” For as the great slow thinker Pina Bausch has said, “We must look and look again” (p. 82). Goat Island looks again and helped us to look again. Goat Island teaches newness in the ordinary, in the insignificant, in the awesomely cliché, in the taboo or ignored, in the old, in the borrowed, in the inherited, in the extinct. Goat Island teaches oldness in the new, allowing the quintessential vernacular to exist as the most
potent relic or amulet, an object or experience infused with power beyond its origin or context.

Goat Island teaches creative response as critique. To engage the critical as well as the creative sides of the mind (see Bottoms and Goulish, p. 210), while responding to works, words, and natural and manmade phenomena. There is a work; it is work. There is a response to the work; it also is work. It is critique. It is to be repeated. Repeated until dead.

The reason something can always be pulled from nothing is because that something is triggered by what the individual gives to the subject and not the other way around. Although things may occasionally seem to be nothing, no person ever is. And it is in this realization that my teaching practice changed in relation to Northside’s collaboration with Goat Island. My current reflections on all the teaching I’ve ever undergone, from the teaching my parents did to the teachings I get from my wife and our four children, are recontextualized as moments of art—that is—moments filled with poetry, mystery, generosity, a certain degree of consciousness, freedom, and ethical implications.
Chapter 5

An auto-ethnographic performance text examining the teacher MO
Thoughts on the performance

It was at this moment, through my observation of Goat Island’s “alive” MO that I was able to recognize what others had taught me in my life, even in those moments of my life when I was actively resisting my teachers and their “agenda” for my life. My teachers—my poor teachers—exerted an enormous amount of energy to—maybe teach me—but mostly to help me come to that moment when I began to care about myself and my education. As I recounted in my introduction I didn’t care about school, so it was very difficult for me to learn anything. There were several exceptions though, and it’s too bad I didn’t realize this until I was no longer with those teachers. One of the main exceptions to my early educational disdain was, that if a teacher cared I began to take that teacher seriously as a person. It is only now—some seventeen years after I finished high school that I realize how much of their interpersonal and loving MOs I’ve been imitating in my own teaching practice.

On March 11, 2010 I was invited to give a lecture at my friend and colleague Alberto Aguilar’s school, Harold Washington College. I had received an invitation to be a part of the 2010 spring semester’s Visiting Artists Series at about the same time that I received the three questions for the comprehensive exam portion of my PhD. I accepted this invitation without really knowing what I was going to present at this artist’s talk and also, quite ambivalent, about where my PhD research was going. A few days after I accepted the invitation to give the artist’ talk at HWC, it was requested of me to forward the title of my talk and a short description of my research for publicity purposes. At that point I invented a title that I felt would not only reflect my current research interest, but would also serve as a directive for a yet unformulated performance. I told the folks at
Harold Washington College that my talk would be called, Look here, no look there:

Teaching as an artwork of multiple middles.

From that title sprung two works: the comprehensive exam that I defended as part of my PhD requirements and the performance/lecture, which I enacted on March 11, 2010 in Chicago. My thinking behind the construction of the title was to leave the ideas behind the title open enough that I wouldn’t feel overly restricted in the actual development of both the lecture and the comprehensive exam. However, I was most interested in pinpointing something about my educational philosophy that I felt confident would stay the same from the time I authored the title, all the way through the writing of the comps, the lecturing from the comps, and the defending of the comps. Whatever those philosophies of education were, the only way I thought they would stay consistent over time, was if they had already been steadily present in the history of my learning and teaching in previous years. I decided that I would go with something that reflected something that I have become increasingly aware over the years. I decided to concentrate on that pervasive feeling that I imagine comes up more vividly the more one looks into it, that is the reality of all that I don’t know.

This idea of “all that I don’t know” expands incrementally in conjunction with my meeting of strangers and so I knew that it had something to do with the Zen idea of individual universes, or multiple middles. Since I am neither a practitioner of Zen, nor a scholar on the topic, this thought led me to my second-hand Zen master, John Cage, who appropriated the multi-ring circus and its dynamic of how involuntary ignorance is created, often times, by purposeful focus. What I mean here is that John Cage often used the model of the multi-ring circus to make it impossible for anyone member of the
audience to see everything that was happening. This put his audiences in a situation
where they had to make instantaneous curatorial choices about what they were going to
see and what they were going to miss. In other words, by choosing to look at something,
the audience member had to choose to miss another thing.

During the weeks of responding to the questions that my committee had come up
with for my comprehensive exam, I have to confess that I could never stop visualizing the
performance I was simultaneously preparing for in Chicago. I made no effort to fit the
comprehensive exam’s length into the fifty minute time limit of the lecture; I frequently
would read portions of the comprehensive exam/lecture aloud to myself just to check the
piece’s presentational cadence and fluidity. It was through this reading aloud, and the
constraints of the title I composed when I was first invited to Harold Washington, that I
began to imagine how I might solve the issue of fitting a fifty page comprehensive exam
response into a fifty-minute lecture time slot.

Taking my cue from the two John Cage performances I describe in the lecture
itself—particularly the multi-centered piece performed in 1952 at Black Mountain
College—I attempted to make the short duration of the artist talk, a parameter rather than
a constraint for the execution of my performance-lecture. Since at that point the essay
that I submitted as my response to the comprehensive exam had begun to striate into
eight distinguishable sections, I decided to try an experiment. I sent this email to a
handful of my former Northside College Prep students who were still living in Chicago:
Hi.

So, I'm giving a talk at Harold Washington College on March 11th at 11am and was wondering if you wanted to be a reading proxy for me? What it would entail would be you standing and reading a prepared text that I wrote, plus one additional thing that you would contribute. Let me know if you can or even want to do it. Thanks and I hope you are well.

Take care – jorge

I received just the right amount of responses, six. Even though there were eight narratives, I only needed six proxies for my lecture since two of the narratives were short enough to be combined and I wanted to reserve the last narrative for myself, as a sort of conclusion.

Sasha, Evan, Erin, Liz, Alex, and Zach all committed to serving as the proxy-readers of my lecture. I began the lecture by giving an introduction that was a modified version of the introduction I wrote for my comprehensive exam. I contextualized my talk around Gregory Bateson’s *Metalogues*, Gabriel Orozco’s simultaneous *can* and *can’t do* paradox, and my nine-year old son Jorge’s creative response to my narrative through his own writing. I told the audience that they were then going to witness a three hour and ten minute lecture. I was joking, of course.

Feeling the air get sucked out of the room, I reassured everyone that my hope was to condense that three-hour presentation into the remaining thirty-five minutes of the lecture. I explained that I would do that through the help of my six proxy readers. That is, I was going to present the entire three hour lecture in six parts, all read simultaneously.
I introduced each one of the proxies who were sitting amongst the audience and then directed them to please take their place in the six areas around the space that I had designated for their reading. I explained that the readers would not be speaking at a volume louder than conversational and that the audience was free to travel from reader to reader, making their way around the room according to their own taste and discretion. I encouraged the audience to listen in a way that worked best for each of them individually, explaining that each proxy was going to repeat their part twice. I also explained that in the inevitability by any singular listener to capture everything that was being presented in the room during the lecture, members of the audience were free to talk to each other about what they heard after the lecture. I reassured them that there were no secrets in the talk, just the unavoidable reality of a learner’s incapacity to know it all. There were about eighty members in the audience.

After this I sat silently, even meditatively stoic as my six proxies launched into their individual readings. The themes in my comprehensive exam responses were: Deviation, Failure, Priorities, Aesthetics, Play, Relationships, and Collaboration. These seven themes served as the titles for the narratives that my six proxy readers were enacting. The murmur throughout the room was musical, and like Cage during many of his performances, I was hearing for the first time, something I had only imagined. And, of course, what I was hearing was nothing like what I had imagined.

In the directions I had given my proxies, I asked them to please select one paragraph from what I had written and interpret that section however they wished, without letting me know what they had intended before hand. I wanted to be surprised by what they came up with. This element coupled with my directive to repeat each reading
twice, produced a rhythm in the lecture that was unexpected. Zach, one of the proxies, began to unpack his backpack revealing objects that he associated with what I had written. After reading the narrative through once, he repacked his backpack and repeated the action for the second round. Another proxy—Sasha—fluctuated between stereotypical regional accents (something between a New Jersey or Boston accent) throughout his reading. Since that proxy was sitting closest to where I was I could clearly hear and see his listeners shift between confusion and laughter. After the performance, when I asked him why he did this he responded that the voice he heard while reading my writing was that of a troublemaker. Evan, who discovered upon moving to his designated area that his chair had been taken, improvised by slouching on the floor in a corner of the room, forcing his listeners to come nearer to the ground in order to hear him. Liz, a wonderful printmaker, was given the narrative about my high school wrestling days and she blew a coach’s whistle right before she shouted out the line “Take a knee boys!” When that whistle interrupted the entire lecture hall, everyone—no matter where they were standing—turned to look; it caused a collective pause, which for a moment reminded everyone that although they were paying attention separately to their own situations, everyone was still together in the same space.

What follows is the text that was presented for the performance. It is an autoethnographic performance text in the mode of what Norman Denzin (2003) does with his “performance texts”, which are, “meant to be read aloud as spoken-word texts, as coperformances” (p.131). The text, however, puts forth something very important that is also meant to buttress my thesis in this dissertation, and that is the MO of the teacher that finds kinship with the MO of the artist. As I mentioned previously, the themes for the
different sections were particular MOs that I now recognize in my past teachers’
pedagogies—some of which I’ve already mentioned in other parts of the dissertation—
and some that are now just coming up. The MOs are permissions towards pedagogical
and artistic deviation, failure, prioritizing, aesthetics, play, relationships, and
collaboration. I believe that I inadvertently collected these MO permissions from these
teachers in my past and it was gathering permissions from artists that helped me to value
them in these pedagogues.

**Look here, no look there: Teaching as an artwork of multiple middles**

In the 2000 introduction to Gregory Bateson’s *Steps to an ecology of mind*, which
was originally published in 1976, his daughter Mary Catherine talks about the *metalogues*
that Bateson wrote in the fifties. The *metalogues* were conversations between a father and
a daughter touching on various topics in a sort of stream of consciousness manner. The
father would say one thing and the daughter would have a question. The daughter’s
question would then cause the father to reevaluate his word choice and any *matter-of-
factness* his initial answer may have inadvertently put forth. All the writing was
obviously done by Bateson who would play both the role of the teaching father and the
curious, yet precociously sensitive daughter. At the time that the *metalogues* were
written, his readers would have relegated the topics that Bateson covered—through this
Father/Daughter proxy-dialogue—to the peripheries of Bateson’s expertise. Known in the
fifties as an anthropologist, Bateson’s propensity towards a more holistic and organic
approach to knowledge—or as he would call it “an ecology of mind”—was not accepted
as good academic practice due to the threat Bateson’s intellectual integrations posed to
neatly segregated fields of study.
Mary Catherine describes the freedom that the Father/Daughter proxy-dialogue allowed Bateson as follows: “Daughter is uncorrupted by academic labeling and becomes Father’s excuse to approach profound issues outside of their boundaries” (p. ix). And this—in fact—is exactly what happens. The exchanges between the Father and Daughter proxies are playful and purposefully naïve, while remaining curiously introspective. Using the device of the *metalogues* Bateson addresses a plethora of very thick topics from politics and art to humanness and spirituality. I’m borrowing my cue for this comprehensive essay from the tone Bateson uses in the *metalogues* and from the experimental spirit through which they are crafted. Although I’m not taking Bateson’s conversational approach, I have decided that I wanted to write this collection of narratives in a manner that is contrary to the manner in which I would usually write an academic paper. Simultaneously I’m aiming to achieve something that is wholly academic; that is to challenge my own preconceived notions of what an academic project can be by conceptualizing this collection of narratives in a manner that is accessible enough to share with my own young children.

Jorge (8), Lucas (7), Mateo (4) and Lucia (3) are four kids whose minds seem to easily and often super-consciously cross between what I might compartmentalize as academic, creative, ethical and spiritual activities. Since none of our children have ever attended any formal schooling they are not yet fully aware of what it means to separate moments of learning into differing categories of knowing. After I had written several of the sections that are found below, I read some of them to my kids to see if I was achieving the form that I had intended. Something curious, although not wholly surprising, came from this experiment.
But before discussing what the outcome of that little experiment was, I should say that in addressing the various questions that were posed to me by my dissertation committee I have taken an incredible amount of liberty in composing my response. Firstly, I have eliminated—at least in form—the separation that was delineated for me with the original three questions. I have not responded to the three questions with three separate answers, rather I have responded to all 31 of the questions that were raised in the three separate question categories with 8 narratives that touch on the issues brought up in all three of the question subsets. I should note that at the time this introduction was written I was unsure if my principle audience was, actually my children (as stated above), my dissertation committee (which sanely I should have aimed for) or a broader imaginary audience composed of artists, teachers, and writers that I often imagine showing my creative works to.

Hopefully not reducing the reach of the questions that were posed to me by my committee, I’d like to present my understanding of the basic aims of those questions before going any further. The first set of questions concern my philosophy of education, its roots and its projections. The second set of questions sought to help me mine my personal experiences to discuss my teaching practice, my artistic ambitions, and some of my lifestyle choices, which reciprocally affect each other. The third and final question prods a curious finger into my fascination with the composer John Cage and what my research about his life and work can offer the fields of art, art education, education in general, philosophy and my own life, artistic, and pedagogical practices.
The first two questions, which were meant to be the shorter ones, have really flowered into the longest part of this essay. The reason being is because I have realized that although John Cage is a superb model for what I would like to present as “pedagogical possibilities”, he is “superb” in this particular way only to me. And the fact that I find him so complete a model is not because of something he did, but because of something I found in him; something—for that matter—that I scavenged for. For what it’s worth, John Cage may have found my proposals about his pedagogical concerns preposterous and possibly even violently extracted and self-centered. It is true, Cage for me is really more about me than him. I say this because I often find myself reading about Cage or reading his words and liberally interpreting in my imagination what I am reading. What I imagine, and you can see this towards the end of this collection, is something incredibly generous both in its execution and scope. When I am reading about what Cage did, or how he said something I am taken into a romantic realm where the power of words inspire—that is, breathe life—into an otherwise disorganized mass of creative impulses, schooled judgments, and idealistic hopes. I can’t say if my attraction to Cage has to do with how everything I’ve read is positioned or if it has to do with my position on what I’m reading, I have to think that it is both. Either way I recognize that my take on Cage is ultimately more about me than him, so I’ve allowed this collection to take “me” on primarily, knowing that the ghost of John Cage is inseparable at this point from who I propose to be as an educator, artist, and scholar.

Through Cage I find a structure through which some of my teaching behaviors can be refined. My approach to Cage’s philosophy of life is admittedly religious in that I often find myself thinking, “What would John Cage do or think about this?” Because of
my admiration for Cage I’m prone to represent his ideas through a somewhat idealistic lens and although I certainly believe that sometimes promoting this idealism is important in terms of the pedagogical development of others, I ultimately recognize that the only thing I can do for a student is point in a general direction and trust that the student’s personal ability, intellect, and desire to make meaning will help them find what is valuable for their particular projects.

To this end Cage’s influence is only mentioned directly in two of the eight parts in this compilation, which attempts to trace my pedagogical inclinations to significant experiences in my past. Each of these eight narratives is introduced with a title. The title is descriptive of two things: the first being the time in my life that that section accounts for; the second is something like a two-word poem that speaks to the pedagogical idea being recalled from that time in my educational history. For example, the first time John Cage comes up—both in my life and in this paper—is during Part 6: First year of teaching, learning play. This section deals with my first year of teaching at Northside College Preparatory High School in Chicago, a time when playing became a dominant part of my pedagogical repertoire. “Learning play” however, is also a wordplay that proposes the duel idea that play is learned but also that learning is play. The other seven parts follow this pattern of duel meaning and deal with deviation, failure, priorities, aesthetics, relationships, collaboration, and multi-centrism. All the sections propose—through an autoethnographic position—that individuals can learn how to deviate, fail, prioritize, aestheticize, relate, collaborate, and exist as one of many centers, while at the same time postulating that learning is deviation, failure, prioritizing, aestheticizing, relating, collaborating and the non-destructive coexistence of differing multiple centers.
Now, back to the experiment that I enacted with the form of this collection. I read several parts of these narratives to my kids. Lying on my bed with the laptop on my chest, the kids were strewn around me like pillows—limp, the way we wait for sleep and dreams. I started reading. They listened attentively the way they always do whenever adults are telling funny or scary stories. When I was finished, Jorge our eight year-old son said, “Wow, I didn’t know all that stuff! I liked it.” He scurried off the bed, like an inventor with an idea and as he exited the bedroom he shouted back, “I’m going to write my own story!”

Moments later my wife and I could hear his concentration-hum, which is a sound Jorge inadvertently makes when he’s deeply concentrating on some activity. It’s literally a steady “ohm”, the kind of sound a person might make while meditating. “Ohmnnnmm” resounded from his rapt body and half an hour later Jorge turned up with a collection of pages that he had bound together with masking tape. He asked me if he could read me his story and I said “of course”. And then I was treated to the story of a detective who is on the lookout for two thieves who stole a million dollars. The story was five pages long and had illustrations. At the conclusion of Jorge’s reading I told him that I liked his novel and he asked me what a “novel” was. I found myself in my very own metalogue explaining to my son what a novel was, a thing whose meaning I had never really given much thought. I explained how it was different than a biography, how it was different from a work of science-fiction, but how it was also the same. The protagonist in Jorge’s novel was a fedora wearing mixture of who Jorge is today, who he hopes to be in the future, and who he often is vicariously through literary heroes that he admires; Peter from The Lion, the
Witch and the Wardrobe, Bilbo from The Hobbit, The Hardy Boys, Ben Ten from Cartoon Network and Anakin Skywalker before he became Darth Vader.

I now recognize in Jorge’s writing two things in relation to what I went through in my own writing process for this collection. The first thing is that the writing came with a certain degree of ease, I sat down and I wrote and wrote, and it was unlike any other writing experience I’ve had in my life. I, like Jorge, was an inventor with an idea and I needed to hurry before it escaped me. It wasn’t stream of consciousness writing though, because the way that I mark stream of consciousness writing is by its apparent lack of immediate revisions. No, what I was doing was more like slow and steady archeology. I found myself carefully but consistently digging, unearthing artifacts that spoke of a greater whole. My mind was making its own concentration-hum, maybe something like what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls “work as flow” (p. 143).

The second thing is that I found myself putting forth a persona who is a mixture of who I currently am, who I hope to be, and the many voices I’ve lived vicariously through over the last twenty years. Artists, writers, poets, teachers, filmmakers, and even fictional character’s thumbprints became readily visible in the narratives I began to construct during my writing process. That said; I was surprised at the moment of writing this introduction—which I wrote after having written the eight narratives that follow—to find an eerie lack of citations in the main body of the text. It was as if all the important writers and artists who have so heavily influenced my practice were hiding behind an accidentally constructed veil. This inadvertent veil I will (at my own peril) choose to leave for the moment hoping that by doing so I will not be doing a disservice to all of the great thinkers that I am indebted to, nor to the readers of this paper.
At the beginning of this collection I cited two separate epigraphs that I felt spoke to this year in my life, 2010, in which I find myself assembling this compilation of narratives. Every one of the stories that follows in this collection starts with a memory. Even though my most recent memories are clearest, they are also the most fragmented and that inhibits me from writing about them with the same kind of reflexivity. You’ll notice that I don’t directly write about anything that has happened in the last year in these essays. The congealing that usually occurs with time obviously hasn’t transpired for my current memories yet, but those memories lay bare in the foreground of my mind like bits of paper strewn about on a table, ready to be arranged and rearranged. They can be shuffled about and represented in any way necessary. So to conclude this introduction, I point to those two somewhat contradictory epigraphs, because they both speak to those current memories but don’t fix them prematurely.23

The first one, the one that comes from the Bible, comes from an Old Testament book that is somewhat laid out like a comprehensive exam, the book of Proverbs. Written by King Solomon, who is said to have been the wisest king of Israel, Proverbs is a book instigated by memories, producing a collection of doubts, questions, proposals, slivers of

23 Those two epigraphs were:

“A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; he rages against all wise judgment” (Proverbs 18:14, New King James Version).

And:

“Who has the right to have an opinion on other countries just like that? I’m very much aware that I’m a visitor or an immigrant, so I don’t feel the right to make any statements about other countries. But at the same time, I’m living in a culture and I’m a political person, and I have opinions. But it’s hard for me to have an opinion about my own country” (Orozco, 2009, p. 92).
wisdom, laments and prayers. This particular tidbit, or warning against “isolation” speaks to my main concern in education, which is conviviality or living near one another in a way that values the wisdom of others.

The second quote comes from the Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco, someone whose diverse modes of operation motivate me to be less sure of myself. Orozco makes his comments in response to the issue of whether or not an artist can or should speak for a certain group of people, for example Mexicans or artists. His answer which is “no”, but “yes” is my favorite kind of answer. And in this particular instance where I find myself trying to talk for, about, and alongside others, what I really need to hear is that I can and that I can’t do it. Feeling like I “can” gives me the confidence to put forth words that I would otherwise keep to myself. And feeling like I “can’t” prompts me to put forth those words as inquiry rather than solutions.

On this note, let me take you back to 1988.

**Part 1: Sixth grade, learning deviation**

Everyday at midday during sixth grade my classmates and I would leave our homeroom teacher Mrs. Dubose and walk two doors down to Mrs. Dorothy’s classroom for our math and phonics lessons. Mrs. Dorothy—a former nun—was ruthlessly characterized by most of her students as the meanest, strictest teacher in the entire school. She was my older sister’s homeroom teacher so I heard about Mrs. Dorothy everyday, at least twice a day, during our daily half-hour walks to and from school. Mrs. Dorothy’s severity was highlighted to a screaming crescendo in front of my parents on the days report cards arrived in the mail. “You don’t understand”, my sister would say between
sobs in a mixture of Spanish and English, “Mrs. Dorothy is so mean, she hates me! She hates all of us! She’s so old and she’s the worst teacher ever!”

Mrs. Dorothy used these color-coded phonics workbooks that students were expected to complete one level at a time. I trace the origins of the current attachment I have to my twelve-hundred-page etymology dictionary, and my ability to be semi-competitive while watching television trivia shows to the time I spent in Mrs. Dorothy’s classroom learning word parts in those phonics workbooks. I trace the origins of my investment in the rest of my education to something else that Mrs. Dorothy did, something somewhat deviant on her behalf.

Besides phonics, which I enjoyed considerably and even succeeded at, my year with Mrs. Dorothy was a miserable year. I failed Mrs. Dorothy’s sixth grade math class and I was told that I needed to take six weeks of summer school to make up the lost year. I dreaded summer school. Besides the disruption to my summer vacation and the social stigma associated with it, there was also the prospect of having to see Mrs. Dorothy on a daily basis. Seeing her everyday wasn’t unusual except that in summer school, since it was the only class I was taking, the promise of an occasional reprieve from Mrs. Dorothy’s presence through recess, lunch, gym, art, or any of the other subject areas that were not taught by her was eliminated. Even worse was the fact that summer school was going to concentrate on what I had been led to believe was my most deficient subject area. It was going to be a summer of math without the phonics material, which so often shielded me from Mrs. Dorothy’s supposed tyranny.
At Jane Addams Elementary the demographics during the regular academic year appeared to be economically and ethnically diverse. Not surprisingly though, the summer school classroom was occupied mostly by blacks, non-English speaking Polish kids, and Mexicans such as myself, all of which came from low-middle, working class income brackets and lived in the apartments by the racehorse track on the outskirts of town as opposed to the single family homes that formed a fortressed two-mile radius around the school. By the regulations of the summer school Mrs. Dorothy was under contract to hold math sessions four times a week for four hours for us failures. But something very interesting happened on that first sunny day of the remedial summer session in mid June of 1988, a few days before my thirteenth birthday. After about two hours of math Mrs. Dorothy asked us to put away our books. She asked us to take out a piece of paper and to close our eyes for a minute. She walked in between the neat rows of desks we were sitting in like a navel vessel pulling into dock. She stood next to me quietly and I could hear her red felt-tip pen scribbling something on my piece of paper. Tempted as I was to open my eyes, I kept them closed and imagined her failing me right on the first day of summer school. I imagined opening my eyes and seeing the big fat red “F” on my paper. “Get out!” She would shout and I would walk out—not ashamed, since that sort of teacher treatment had lost its novelty for me—destined to work some menial jobs that didn’t require math, or school, or even citizenship for that matter, to be good at.

When I opened my eyes, what I saw on my paper was not an “F” it was a “G”, a mysterious cursive capital letter “G”. Mrs. Dorothy went to the front of the class and drew a similar cursive capital letter “S” on the board and then she proceeded to give the bulbous top of the “S” something that appeared to look like a beak. She next drew an eye
in the center of that bulbous top. Then Mrs. Dorothy put two webbed feet at the bottom of the “S” and a wing in the fattest part of the cursive “S”. In the arabesque part were the written “S” ends Mrs. Dorothy’s other modifications now allowed it to appear like a swans tale (see Fig.2). She then said, “Okay, now you try.” She didn’t want us to draw swans; she wanted us to transform the letters she drew on our papers through drawing. I did. I spent the next two hours drawing tigers, elephants, aliens, whales, robots, clowns, and even swans. What Mrs. Dorothy was trying to teach us about math during the second two hours of those summer school days is up for speculation.

Ultimately what Mrs. Dorothy taught me about problem solving through the deviation of drawing, modeling with plasticine, and creating nylon potholders has enfleshed itself into the very essence of who I actively become as a teacher and a student in life and in education. Mrs. Dorothy was the first teacher in my life who exceeded her mandate to educate my mind in order to do her part in transforming my life.

**Part 2: Eighth grade, learning failure**

I didn’t graduate from Jane Addams Elementary and I never had Mrs. Dorothy as my homeroom teacher, which she would have been had I completed eighth grade at her school. Since my sister was ready to enter high school before me and my parents understanding of the American Dream chided them into thinking that their kids needed to attend a high school in a better resourced community—preferably away from the racial,
economic, and generally crime riddled sloppiness of the city—we moved further west from the Chicago metro area into a very nice, manicured suburb. My father—who has been a welder for thirty-four years at American Grinding, a steel mill in an industrial part of the city—worked overtime, borrowed money, and prayed fervently so that it would be possible to move away from the apartments near the racetrack and into a single family home in much greener Glen Ellyn. My parents crossed the border into the United States one year before I was born, around 1975, with my older sister in tow. Later, when I was eight, my younger sister was born. My mother was always at home with us and this seemed to provide a certain degree of security for my two sisters and I regardless of where we were living or what our economic situation was. That being said, I believe that this move to the suburbs was a genuine attempt on my father’s behalf to give my sisters and I opportunities my mother and he never had.

At the time of our move Glen Ellyn and the suburbs that surround it made up a cluster of some of the most affluent and politically conservative towns in the Midwest. This was the district from which congressman Henry Hyde—leader of the judiciary committee that led the charge in President Bill Clinton’s impeachment trial—hailed. This area otherwise known as DuPage county is located about forty minutes outside of downtown Chicago and is also the hometown of a few other notable cultural figures, among them the comedians Jim and John Belushi, the experimental musician and performance artist Laurie Anderson, and the controversial pedagogue Bill Ayers.

What was significantly different about the schools in our new town was exactly what my parents suspected would be different, and that was the availability of resources. Unlike Jane Addams Elementary, my new school Lombard Junior High didn’t just switch
the students’ classes for math, phonics, and science; we had a specialist teacher for every single subject including photography, woodshop, home economics, and art.

Coincidentally my transformative educational moment during eighth grade also came in a math class and it too was a math class I was failing.

   My eighth grade algebra teacher Mrs. Olsen was a huge Chicago Bears fan. She always wore the team colors, orange and blue, even when it wasn’t football season. She rooted for the Bears regardless of how the Bears were playing. The one perk she seemed to allow herself with her teacher salary was season tickets to Soldier Field to watch her beloved Chicago football team play through rain, fog, sun, and snow. In retrospect, it seemed like Mrs. Olsen, her Bears’ fascination, and I met at yet another crossroads of my educational development.

   I would sit in Mrs. Olsen’s class copying figures on my homework papers from a book a friend let me borrow called How to draw Marvel comics. Mrs. Olsen saw me doing it but she never reprimanded me or called attention to how unrelated, what I was doing was to math. I wasn’t disruptive I just didn’t pay attention to what she was teaching. Actually, the only thing I remember more clearly than these drawing sessions in Mrs. Olsen’s classroom is that at the end of the year I didn’t fail the course. Along with social science (where I cheated) and my electives (which were designed to pass a kid like me), algebra was the only other course I passed without any trouble that year. In the end I must have passed enough of my classes or else I imagine I wouldn’t have been allowed to go to high school. Even that’s disputable though since I definitely shouldn’t have passed Mrs. Olsen’s class and I did. Recently, while looking for Mrs. Olsen online, I came across a parent’s comment on an online forum for the new school that most of that junior
high’s teachers transferred to when it finally closed down just a couple years after I graduated. The frustrated parent on the forum exclaims that their, “child has had reading support since 3rd grade in this district and has not improved! Yet he continues to get pushed thru to the next grade level and his grades do NOT reflect his test scores”. I found this a striking comment that resonated with my experience with these same teachers since it was actually this apparent practice of social promotion that seemed to be what aided me in finding the kind of learner I needed to be.

Several times during my time in Mrs. Olsen’s class she asked me to make her posters. They weren’t math posters; Mrs. Olsen asked me to make her large color pencil and marker posters celebrating—what at this point had been acknowledged as—our mutual interest in the Chicago Bears. I didn’t make them during her class. After school I would rush home to complete my commissions, foregiving my homework and even skipping the proverbial two to three hours of television that I used to watch, in order to satisfy the demands of my patron. The posters became a hit and kids started to ask for large drawings of some of their favorite comic book heroes. My father provided me with rolls of discarded paper that were used at his factory for making layouts and I made large, sometimes life-size images of Wolverine and The Punisher for some of the more popular kids at school. I’d charge them five bucks for each drawing. I don’t remember playing sports during that time; I don’t remember hanging out with friends; I don’t remember reading Huck Finn; all I recall is drawing everyday, consistently, for hours. It was something! I had work to do, projects and deadlines, and customers. I plowed through my orders, occasionally stopping only to eat, take a bike trip to the local library (where I checked out movies, not books), or watch TV.
At the time I wasn’t exactly sure what Mrs. Olsen was doing. Frankly I didn’t care too much. Thinking about it after all these years though I now realize that she taught me something about failure in a similar way that Mrs. Dorothy did. She taught me that failure and even success are not ends. Mrs. Olsen taught me that not everyone succeeds in the same way. She planted the initial seed in my mind that later grew into a thought about the possibilities for some educational strategies to be more concerned with navigating and working with the differences of individuals and not just the mere measurement of achievements. The ethics of social promotion are debatable for sure. And had it not been for other factors I’m sure that I may have been one of the children left behind, however I can’t overstate what Mrs. Olsen’s caring did to transform, not only my work ethic, but the perception of my peers towards a kid who was—not only new to that school—but also awkward, scared, and without a sense of direction for the future.

**Part 3: Tenth grade, learning priorities**

The first few years of high school were spent in more of the same. Perpetually a bad student I continued to fail classes. These failures coupled with my growing distaste for authority had repercussions for my whole family since most incidents usually required that my dad take valuable time off of work to meet with my teachers. I was still drawing at home but had virtually lost my motivation now that demand for comic book drawings had dried up and I had permanently lost contact with Mrs. Olsen. The only thing that was going okay at the time was football. My love for football had grown to the point where I thought I could actually play the sport. I found out about the summer tryouts; I tried out and made the team.
It didn’t take too long to realize that there were kids on the football team who had been playing since they were five, who had fathers who attended all their games, and who attended all sorts of summer enrichment camps to hone their ability to run faster, throw farther and hit harder. For most Mexican kids such as myself—disadvantaged in height, strength, know-how, and pedigree—the only attributes that we could count on was our poor-diet induced size or whatever freak genes were passed down to us from some tall Dutch colonialist or speedy Aztec. I was a big kid for my age and had a relatively good amount of speed and agility. The coaches let me play, but you could tell that they favored the other kids more. It was weird; the coaches talked to the white kids like they were their sons, they talked to the black kids like they were anomalies of nature or gifts from God specifically sent for their football program, and lastly the coaches talked to the Latinos, Asians, or any other as if we were government mandated intruders. We were outsiders who the coaches were forced to tolerate—I imagine—because of some racial sensitivity or diversity training that they may have gotten on some Monday, when the kids didn’t have school and the faculty had a teacher’s institute day.

In the winter boys who play football wrestle. We were told that this was a way to retain our physical conditioning, but I think that there were really two other reasons for the football players to be recruited onto the wrestling team. The first must have been financial; more wrestlers probably meant more paid positions for coaches, assistants, trainers, etc. The second reason ended up being camaraderie. I guess the idea was that we played better as a football team if we spent the rest of the school year around each other. Riding in school buses during the dead of Chicago’s biting winter, with darkness cascading as early as four o’clock in the afternoon, in order to get your ass handed to you
on a bacteria infested wrestling mat by another half naked boy appeared to be something that made us come closer together. Unlike the images of professional wrestlers that we see on television, Scholastic Wrestling is not as much about aggression as it is about leverage and intelligence. The kind of wrestling we were taught to do was more on par with the skill and concentration of certain martial arts, than with the sheer brutality of television wrestling (which by the way isn’t real). Wrestling was a classroom. Although wrestling matches would rarely exceed six minutes, wrestling’s lessons lasted the entire winter.

In this stinky classroom we were brothers, but this kinship wasn’t natural, and it didn’t carry over from our time on the football field. During football practice, as I’ve mentioned, there was all manner of segregation and social hierarchies that seemed to rule the field more than the playbook did. On the wrestling team though most of that was defused and this, of course, is ironic since football is a team sport and wrestling—although it contains a team component—is mainly carried out by individuals. Unlike Mrs. Dorothy and Mrs. Olsen the one individual that defines this part of my life was a teacher who at the time, I was actually aware was making an impact on my life. I knew, even then, that Coach Klatt was a significant player in my education.

It’s important to note that coach Klatt was white and for all intents and purposes he acted *coachy*. He wore polyester coaching shorts, tight shirts, and a whistle around his neck. He slapped you on the butt when he wanted to encourage you, worked out in the weight room with the wrestlers, always called you by your last name or some nickname offshoot of your last name (mine was “Lucy”), didn’t put up with any crap, and was wholly passionate about winning. Although shorter than me he would sometimes reach
up and grab me by the neck to talk to me, as if to bring my ear—and probably my brain—closer to what he was trying to say. On the other hand, Coach Klatt was unlike any other coach I’d ever come across, real or fictional. He was caring and giving, even loving. He was unprejudiced. He took care of his wrestlers regardless of ability and was genuinely interested in our lives, our studies, and our overall well-being. His wife and he had a little girl who he was never ashamed of adoring publicly. The Klatt’s once invited the team to their house for spaghetti under the pretense that we needed to load up on carbohydrates before a big tournament, although I suspect Coach Klatt just wanted to treat us to dinner. There were students on the team who didn’t play football, students who were on the margins of the school’s social pyramids, and those kids were also vital to the team. Coach Klatt made sure that that was the case.

Coach Klatt made me—one of the heaviest kids on the freshman squad—co-captain of the team with Rush Punchum a feisty, quick, and unrelenting Filipino kid who wrestled towards the bottom of the weight classes, 128 pounds I believe. Here we were, two brown kids, given the leadership positions on a team that was predominately made up of white kids. It was a ceremonial position more than anything, Rush was a great wrestler, but I had minimal amount of experience, was secretly afraid most of the time, and much smaller than most of the competitors at my weight class. I have no idea why Coach Klatt made me one of the captains, but it was the first time I was put in the leadership position of anything. I know that I’ve said that at the time I was aware that coach Klatt was making an imprint in my life, but I wasn’t aware how big that imprint would turn out to be. I didn’t know that it had to do with what I was feeling as a Mexican American, whose father worked in a factory, and whose mother didn’t speak any English.
I didn’t know that it had to do with the fact that, up until that point, I had not heard of college and that my guidance counselor was trying to sign me up for a program that would give me half days of school so that I could be bused to the community college to learn some technical skill like auto repair or culinary arts. I didn’t know that what Coach Klatt was doing was creating a rupture in the inert line that carried me from delinquent other to service trade employee, an epidemic that seemed to spread fairly easily amongst my fellow Mexican-Americans.

Coach Klatt had a policy about academic excellence. He knew we weren’t going to become professional athletes; he wanted us to be good students. One day after a grueling practice he asked us to gather around before we hit the showers. There we knelt, dripping with sweat, thirsty, breathing heavily, listening to Coach Klatt’s disappointed voice talking about our grades. He was being serious. Some wrestlers (I may have been one of them) were dangerously close to being kicked off the team due to their poor performance in the classroom. Other teachers knew that they could report us to Coach Klatt and that he would take care of almost all motivational, academic or disciplinary problems. It worked. We admired him so much that our greatest fear was not getting kicked off the wrestling team but disappointing him. During his talk he said we needed to get our priorities straight. He said, “In life we should always put our faith first, your family next, your learning third, and then—and only then—sports.” I’m not sure that it blew my mind right then and there; I was probably more concerned with eating at that moment. But shortly after I began to look at my life and I began to ask myself if I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. I knew that I wanted to put my relationship with
God first and I was pretty sure that I cared for my parents and my sisters enough to say they were my second priority, but after that things were a little murky.

The only classes I enjoyed in high school were my art classes. I’d often ditch my other classes and go sit in the art room. I’d paint, throw on the potter’s wheel, and look through a bunch of yellowed art books my painting teacher had on an unattended shelf. I stole my first theory book from this shelf, Herschell B. Chipp’s *Theories of Modern Art*[^24]. The art teachers, for whatever reason, seemed to not notice or say anything about the fact that I was in their classroom during times when I didn’t have classes with them. They talked to me, even taught me things that weren’t part of the regular curriculum (i.e. how to build stretchers, cut mattes, fire raku ceramics, recycle clay), but they never questioned the legitimacy of me being there. In a school of four thousand students these three art rooms were a comforting space, a place to eat lunch, a place to meet other kids interested in making things, a place where learning could be done while listening to music, which up until then was unheard of for me.

One time when I got home from school my dad was waiting for me, obviously irate. He asked me, “where were you today?” I told him I was at school. He furrowed his brow, raised his voice and said, “Don’t lie to me!” I was shocked, seriously not knowing what he was so upset about and I innocently repeated, “I was!” He told me that the schools attendance clerk had called and asked why I hadn’t been in my classes and that my mom and him had been worried about me. I told them that I was at school but that I had been in the art room working on some paintings that I’d been making and that it was

[^24]: I was later found out about this and instead of being disciplined my teacher asked me if I wanted to just pay her for it. I did, fifteen dollars.
okay with my art teachers. My whole method of operation had been repeated so many times that I had seriously forgotten that ditching was something you could get in trouble for. This was it; I was in knee-deep and didn’t have too many options. If I continued to wrestle the likelihood of me graduating on time would be slim. Not to mention, I probably would have gotten kicked off the wrestling team somewhere along the line. I had to make a choice.

When my junior year of high school rolled around I didn’t go out for the football team and then when the winter athletic season came I went and had a talk with Coach Klatt. I told him that I was interested in painting and that I wouldn’t be joining the wrestling team anymore. He didn’t say much. He was very disappointed. After that I’d see him in the hall and he wouldn’t talk to me much. It is, to this day, one of my greatest regrets about high school. I wonder if I knew then, what I know now, and if I had the motivation I have now then, could I have been on the wrestling team and developed myself as an artist simultaneously? The truth is I had to set my priorities straight. That was the time to do it and ironically it was Coach Klatt’s words that motivated me to make this very difficult move. After that I seemed to be dropped from a certain strata of the school’s social order and began to be associated with what would be known as the “art kids”. The Goths, the stoners, the rejects, and the troublemakers were all in the art classes. My sports friends sarcastically referred to me as “Leonardo da Vinci” and my art friends found it peculiar that a “jock” had suddenly dropped in amongst them. At home I set up a studio in my bedroom, I salvaged a bookshelf from a pile of trash and put my *Theories of Modern Art* book on it. On Sundays I would argue with my dad because he wouldn’t let me stay home from church to watch football all day; the other days I would
draw and paint continuously in my bedroom, trying to understand what the writers in that book were trying to say. The painting though, helped the reading.

Part 4: Second year of undergraduate school, learning aesthetics

Not being on the wrestling team led to more free time. While I was still a junior in high school I decided to get a job. That year I started a job at the local K-Mart stocking merchandise. One day I was looking at the schedule for working in the break room and noticed that the human resources manager had put me down to train some new employee. “Aguilar”, the paper read. I knew this kid; he was in my journalism class the previous year and I didn’t want anything to do with him. I believe that he had also been in my art class but I was unsure about that since I usually only thought about myself in the studio. I tried to get the day off so that I wouldn’t have to train this guy. He had a bad reputation for picking fights and being a troublemaker and I wasn’t interested in getting to know him. The human resources manager said I couldn’t have the day off and that I’d have to train him. I don’t remember the training day but many things happened after that, which I will never forget.

High School ended for my K-Mart coworker and even though he went to college, he still worked at K-Mart. Soon after that I was promoted to checkout supervisor and he was promoted to cashier; and sometimes on slow nights he would call me over to his register and try to show me drawings in this little black sketchbook he carried around. They were not figurative drawings, they were not even pure abstractions; they were graphite drawn shapes and he talked about them a lot. He’d say to me, “look at how this form pops out. You see how this form recedes? And if I change the tone of that one…
look at what happens to this one.” It was mad scientist talk to me. I would nod and just say, “Interesting…um, I gotta get back to the front desk”. Often times he would ask me to come to his house. He’d say, “Come over. I have some paintings I want to show you.” I would say that I would come some day, but secretly I thought I’d never go over. I was afraid his brothers were going to be there and that they would beat me up. I resisted for a long time.

As these things go it wasn’t too long after this that my one serious high school relationship came to an end. I was alone and depressed and my friend from K-mart was the only friend I had. I went to his house. Sometimes we would watch movies, sometimes we would draw each other, and sometimes we would set up bottles, light bulbs, books and plants and make still-life paintings. Up until that point all of my artistic endeavors were solitary practices. I painted alone and I looked at art alone. I loved listening to music in my darkened bedroom all by myself and I often checked out foreign films from the library and watched them alone. I remember talking to myself a lot, something that interestingly enough doesn’t happen anymore.

One day my friend asked me if I would like to go to his college with him. I had a Friday off for some reason and so I said yes. He had class so I’d have to sit in on his class. It was a foundations 3-D sculpture studio course at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a place I had never been before. I sat through the class and was struck by what was happening at this so-called school. The students all worked independently from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., taking an hour for lunch. The instructor visited us in the corner of the studio where we were sitting, he made some small talk, and he may have even talked about the sculpture my friend was making. Then the instructor walked away and did this
with another student. This blew my mind. Not to mention that this thing that was passing
off as a school was happening in the middle of downtown Chicago and that there was an
abundance of energy oozing out of every inch of this institution. All the courses were
pass/ fail, all the teachers were practicing artists, every student had that slight arrogance
about them and most impacting thing about the whole experience was that this school
was attached to an enormous art museum. It was a museum that contained works of art
that I had previously only seen in poorly framed knock-offs that were either hanging in
my cousin’s dining room or my English teacher’s office. Nighthawks by Edward Hopper,
American Gothic by Grant Wood, the big dot painting by Georges Seurat, paintings by
Van Gogh, Georgia O’Keefe, Picasso—who my friend had introduced me to—not to
mention room upon room of never before seen artifacts, weapons, miniature paintings,
dioramas, sculptures and things like installations and Dada objects, which at the time
were unclassifiable to me. I went back to my high school the next week and told my
guidance counselor that after I graduated I wanted to go to the Art Institute of Chicago.
Soon after that I attended a National Portfolio Day and was accepted into the school on
the spot, I filled out some financial aid forms, got my parents blessing—who quite
frankly were shocked that I wanted to go to more school—and then I was on my way.

The first semester I followed my friend’s footsteps, taking some of the same
courses he had. One of our drawing teachers, George Liebert would consistently tell me
to go talk to the “dead guys” in the museum. I would wander around the museum like it
was my house. I’d cut in front of admirers to look at the Seurat more closely; I’d sneak
into the somewhat hidden Tadeo Ando room located by the Chinese art and just sit there
doing my version of meditating; I’d look at everything people seemed to be avoiding:
Marsden Hartley, Rufino Tamayo, Peter Blume, Arthur Dove, Leonora Carrington, Maurice Denis, Jean Dubuffet and Balthus. I’d go back into the studio and make my own Klee’s, my own Max Ernst’s, and my own Braques. I really fashioned myself a serious artist.

Whether it is was some leftover high school melancholy or just my inability to draw well, I found that I was making a lot of cartoonish type of figures at the time. Thinking that maybe I’d go into something useful like children’s book illustration, and wanting to dissuade this career choice, George Liebert encouraged me to look at what he thought were presumably more serious artists—at least canonized ones. He told me to look at modernist painters who made similar types of drawings to mine, Paul Klee, Emil Nolde and Dubuffet being the chief amongst them. This led to a discovery that changed my entire course while at the Art Institute. Apparently in the sixties there had risen to prominence a group of local artists who worked with popular culture imagery, bright colors, and some of the same technical issues that I was interested in, such as the disorientation of the pictorial space, humor, obsessive craft and narratives. Some of these artists had become known as the Chicago Imagist and many of them taught at the Art Institute. One of the most famous members of this loosely arranged group, Roger Brown, was a not teacher at the Art Institute but that didn’t exempt him from passing down valuable lessons to me in the future, but that came later.

The single most influential one of the so-called Chicago Imagist who did teach at the school for me was Barbara Rossi. Rossi, like Mrs. Dorothy was a former nun and was known for being strict about what she expected and how things should be done. I believe she may have been the only studio teacher at the Art Institute I ever met that failed
someone. I gravitated to Rossi’s passion for things. She would describe works of art as if they were long lost loves. She taught me how to look with generosity, to be curious, and to try to retain as much as possible from the things that attracted me. Rossi is infamous for not showing her slides when asked to give a presentation about her work; instead she’ll often give a lecture about some visual phenomenon that intrigues her and of which she has ample slides. I’ve seen her do this twice, once with a lecture about topiaries and once with a lecture about how ice cream cones that are painted in small town creameries. I have heard many frustrated attendees at her lectures angrily denounce her apparent tomfoolery. She’s not being tricky though; I just think that she likes to answer the question “what is your work about?” with images of things that inspire her.

Rossi had a kindred spirit in Roger Brown and even though I never met him he was kind enough to leave enough of himself to the Art Institute after he died in 1997. The gift Roger Brown left behind consists of various pieces of property, many of his works, his art collection, his journals, and other ephemera from his art practice and love of objects. The crown jewel of the gift was his home and studio on North Halstead not too far from downtown Chicago and this is where I first met him. Now Roger actually passed before I went to his house, but what I actually mean is that at his house—which is now called the Roger Brown Study Collection—was where he first began to impact my work and me. It was officially through Barbara Rossi’s teaching on the aesthetics of the everyday that I was able to appreciate the plethora of objects and artworks that covered every wall of Brown’s studio and house. There were artworks from trained as well as unschooled artists, Kitsch objects ranging from a bust of Elvis Presley to a giant sideshow banner. I repeatedly visited Roger Brown’s house and really developed a
sense—and maybe even a desire—for objects. I felt like I no longer needed to have money to have works of “art” around me that inspired me. In many ways Roger Brown’s house and Barbara Rossi’s lectures on visual culture taught me that my collection of books played the same role as the museum of the Art Institute did when I was so heavily invested in the studio process. More importantly, seeing the aesthetic potential of everything pushed me into a place in my life where I now had a strong desire to point my findings out to anyone who would listen. At that point it occurred to me that I might like to teach.

**Part 5: Third year of undergraduate school, learning relationships.**

I had learned so much about observation from my trips to the Roger Brown Study Collection that the act of looking had become paramount in my approach to the world. I amassed a small collection of books, trinkets, thrift store objects, inexpensive kitsch art, and toys because I wanted to create a small museum in my personal living space even if the museum was made up of objects that were only valuable to me. At the same time some things that are usually not defined primarily as objects—such as people, places, and experiences—began to take on the aesthetic characteristics of artworks to me. This was a ripe time for me to recognize something that I now find obvious: that the learning that I derived from my teachers didn’t just come from their instruction, but also from my daily—and sometimes unnoticed—observations of them as mere people. I recognized that a teacher “functioned” in the world as a thing; something to be studied, not just for what they were trying to teach, but also for whatever other things an alert student wanted to learn from them. Everything from their mannerisms to how they dressed became an integral part of this aesthetic engagement. Concurrently I also recognized the opposite:
that things such as artworks, which are more likely to just be looked at, could also be listened to or sought after for instruction. Things could be teachers. At this point I sought out everything I could literally get my eyes on. I felt like I had developed a hypersensitivity to the visual world, a superpower, which of course had always been there, but had lain dormant since I was a small boy.

For the exercising of this rediscovered skill it was useful for me to take in the aesthetic of a single individual in concentrated doses, like I had with Roger Brown. The Gene Siskel Film Center, which is associated with the Art Institute of Chicago, is one of only two institutions that have the entire collection of Ingmar Bergman movies on actual film. The acquisition of these movies was made during my third year at the Art Institute and the Film Center decided that they would celebrate this gain by holding a three month long Ingmar Bergman festival that included the showing of all of his films from the actual reels in the Film Center’s small theatre. There were also lectures, Q & A sessions with scholars, discussions and a class that occurred every Thursday night during those three months. People were excited! I didn’t know anything about Bergman, but I really enjoyed watching films that were not in English. At the time it seemed like taking a course where I was required to watch movies on a weekly basis in an actual theatre would be relatively fun and easy.

From the very first screening I was stirred, I mean literally stirred; my stomach was constantly in a tumult after each movie. *Sawdust and Tinsel, Wild Strawberries, Through a Glass Darkly, Persona, The Virgin Spring,* and especially *The Seventh Seal* were all black and white presentations that dealt with something I had thought irreconcilable throughout most of my life. Bergman seemed to present the relationship
between humans and spirits (or ideas of God) akin to the relationship between one human and another human; in other words, uncannily real and even tangible. For most of my life the realms of spirits and people seemed to be two very distinct places. Separated by a lot of pomp, ceremony, and hierarchical politics my understanding of “searching for God” was rarely subtle. It lacked all the nuance, interconnectedness, confusion, or even relevance to everyday life that the Bergman films seemed to propose. One of the things that struck me most about Bergman’s spirit/flesh integration was that his images—even the ones with heavy religious symbolism—were not really about religion. I can’t deny though that the religious motifs in his films were my entryway into some of the metaphors he was presenting. Having gone to church all my life I thought that I knew how to read a crucifix, a ghost, and even death whenever I saw it in representation. Bergman’s films however are simultaneously about the doubt and faith that can both sustain and suffocate ecologies, by which I simply mean relationships or how two things interact and affect each other. People talk, they eat, they have sex, they go mad, they play games, they fight, they have visions, they make poetry, they cry and they pray. Sometimes these activities take place in the company of other humans—in fact, are for the sake of other humans—and sometimes they are done in reverence to something greater and more incomprehensible than humanness. I don’t know if for Bergman it was God, but for me it was.

The movies usually ended at nine p.m. so after each film I would walk through a mostly empty downtown Chicago to catch my train. My commute took about an hour and a half and my only companions at that time of night were business people who either worked long hours or business people who drank for four hours in between quitting time
and their ride home; either way almost everyone slept on the train. It’s difficult for me to remember those commutes as anything but depressing since while everyone slept I was wide awake, but I think that might be painting this narrative with too broad a stroke. Those nights were tinged with a heightened awareness of my loneliness, especially how alone I felt in the face of the unknown and much of that was troubled by what I was seeing in these Bergman films. It seemed at the time that most of my fellow art students were looking to further their careers. They wanted to be the next hot artists and they actively networked and maneuvered to incrementally fulfill this goal. In the end though it seemed like people weren’t interested in people, unless the people they were interested in could do something for them. For me death and whatever was on the other side appeared to be too close for comfort and I refused to take that lightly any longer. This decision to come to grips with my own mortality and by default the worth of my life, I believe was my first conscious step towards actually being a teacher, not just acting like one.

**Part 6: First year of teaching: learning play**

While finishing undergraduate school as a painter with a certification to teach art I applied at a handful of suburban high schools that had reputable art programs. I aimed at the big schools in the richest suburbs of Chicago. I was going to marry Maribel upon graduation and I felt like I needed to have the best paying teaching job available. I had heard that Highland Park High School teachers were making more than a hundred thousand dollars a year after thirty years of teaching. Highland Park High paid out the highest salaries to teachers in Illinois at the time, and claimed Michael Jordan’s kids amongst its student population. Why in the world this was important to me escapes me at the moment, but the position at Highland Park really looked like an option. My
interviews went really well and were very long. Maribel and I fantasized about living in this community going as far as having a picnic near the school grounds one summer day.

Margaret Koreman, a teacher of mine at the Art Institute insisted that I apply to a newly opened Chicago Public School that her husband taught physics at. I resisted wanting to get away from the city and settle down in some posh, well resourced suburban school that I thought would reflect my own high school experience. She insisted and I respected her so much that I applied, even though I thought I had the Highland Park job in the bag and this would only give me something to leverage against that offer. The school, Northside College Preparatory High School was one year old and was the first public school built in Chicago in some forty-six years. It had one art teacher and one art classroom, which had hosted classes of as little as seven students during its first year. I got to my interview and noticed that Joanne Minyo, the highly experienced art teacher who headed the department was pregnant and was going to go on maternity leave soon. I realized that if I got the job I wouldn’t be teaching alongside her, but with another newly minted teacher such as myself. I was also told that there wasn’t another art room and that the art department had fought to acquire a room that was normally used for drivers ed. and that that room would now be the new art teachers room. The pay, I knew, would be a lot less than Highland Park, but the people were incredibly nice. They were supportive and had the energy, which I’ve now come to recognize as enthusiastically trusting and genuinely encouraging.

While the assistant principal was showing me the newly converted art room, I looked at the tables and said that I would probably place them around the perimeter of the room along the walls, facing the walls. He asked me why I would do such a thing and I
said, “to keep the kids working and the talking to a minimum.” This little trick was something that I saw another teacher do at the nice suburban high school that I student-taught at. I thought that by saying this I would impress him with my plan for classroom management. He looked at me with a smirk and said, “oh, we don’t mind if our students talk to each other during class. Actually, we encourage that.” Embarrassed, I withheld any further attempts at acting like I knew what I was doing, opting instead to ask questions and let my portfolio speak for itself.

In early May of 2000 I heard back from both schools. Highland Park said they really liked me and that they thought I would fit in well at their school, however they thought I was too inexperienced and that after three years I would be a great fit. Strangely, they asked me to reapply after I had picked up some experience elsewhere. Northside said they wanted to see me teach and asked if I’d be willing to come in and show students how to edition prints. I said that I would.

Wearing an olive-colored, wool blazer purchased at a thrift store I demonstrated with some of my own prints how to number an edition—artists proof, one out of twenty-five, artists signature, etc. Sweating in my wool blazer I instinctually reprimanded a girl who was putting on lipstick and not paying attention during my demonstration, something that I couldn’t see myself doing today. Her classmates “ooohs” and snickers caused her to give me a dirty look, but it didn’t faze me. I organized the cleanup at the end of class and dismissed everyone; all this while several faculty members looked on. Afterwards I was told that the principal wanted to meet me. I was taken into the main office and led to another office where the nameplate “Dr. James P. Lalley” was invisible due to the fact that the door was wide open. I sat at a table that had a bucket of fun-sized
chocolates at it. We exchanged some formalities and then Dr. Lalley began to talk to me as if I worked at the high school already. “So, as you can see on this chart” he pointed to a piece of paper, “your pay increases every year here until that year. At which point you’d have to continue your education…” I stopped him mid sentence and asked if I had gotten the job. He said “of course!” as if I should have known already. To which I simply responded that I just wasn’t sure.

Dr. Lalley shook my hand and congratulated me. He marked my arrival in the Chicago Public Schools with two simple, albeit telling gestures. The first was his wide open door. The spirit of trust that I had sensed in the faculty, administration, and students emanated from the principal outward. For the next seven years I found myself welcomed in his office for a number of conversations ranging from pedagogical philosophy to administrative nuts and bolts. The second was his affirmative outlook. Dr. Lalley once said to me that he tried to find a way to say “yes” before considering how something couldn’t be done. This is the kind of support that I try to pass down to my students.

From the very beginning my classroom was a playground. That girl who I asked to put away her makeup took my classes the next three years. I readily admitted to my students that I lacked certain know-how and facts, I accepted everything that everyone made as something that could really be looked at. By discouraging concentration on letter grades, examining failure instead of just declaring it, and constantly asking for and taking student input I declared us a collective “we” and no longer an “I and them”. We mined all of our actions and analyzed all of our moves. We were not interested too much in finishing, rather in prolonging. We were not interested in good, rather much more in work. We were a philosophical bunch who cared about things being interesting, funny,
engaging, and about us at that particular moment of our lives. We ate together, we traveled together, and we pointed things out—to each other, to the world, to ourselves. We laughed together, got in trouble together, asked a ton of questions together and fought the urge to be any one thing together. Yes, there were things made; paintings, performances, sculptures, acts of theatre, books, installations, pieces of ceramics, piñatas, collages, games, etc. But the things made were left behind; the things learned however have infiltrated many of our lives. Some of us have gone on to study art but most of us have just continued to live in a way that filters the world through the sensibilities of an artist.

There is no record of this, but in the first year that I taught at Northside College Prep, one of my classes was asked to participate in an all school assembly. Since I had been running a course called The Surrealism Sensibility we thought that we should perform one of the experimental composer John Cage’s pieces. We practiced and performed 4’33’, which is notoriously known as Cage’s silent piece. We came on stage and stood on the choir risers. I stood as conductor. Carl, a piano student in the class, sat at the grand piano, which was brought on stage just prior to our performance. He opened the keyboard cover and sat there for thirty silent seconds. Carl closed the lid as murmuring rippled throughout the audience. The airshafts making their operating rattle, Carl opened up the piano again, this time for two minutes and twenty-three seconds. On the risers the choir of students dressed in black pants and white shirts stood silently, peering out at the faces of five-hundred of their classmates and teachers. Two and a half minutes of silence is a long time. Eruptions of clapping could be heard in the auditorium followed by the “ssshhhing” of teachers, curtly attempting to retain order. Giggling was heard in the
audience, whispering, and even sighing; seats being kicked, books being dropped, followed by nervous laughter. The auditorium doors, however quietly, were heard opening and closing. The students on the risers were stoic, almost meditative. Time passed. Carl closed the lid. He paused and then opened it again. One minute and forty seconds—last part. At this point the crowd was calmer. They knew we were going to be silent, but they didn’t know how long. The audience sat there and watched, if not listened to, the silence. Carl closed the lid. The students took a unified bow and the crowd hooted and hollered, standing on their seats, the way they only did whenever their classmates performed a hip-hop number. What created this favorable response amongst the audience? Was it our audacity that they were happy to have witnessed? Or was it something that they began to experience themselves the longer the piece went on?

During my final year at Northside, during a teacher’s institute day, we were asked to list things that made the school a great place to be at and also to make a list of things that needed improvement. Several faculty members pointed to various performances that I had done with my students over the years, including one we did on the first anniversary of September 11th. Using projected images we made modeled after the ink wash drawings of California artist Raymond Pettibon and the songs of Woody Guthrie, we turned a darkened auditorium into a temple/monument of nonsense that given enough contemplation began to generate thoughts in those who experienced it. In other words, like September 11th, our installation moved from confusion, through generativity, and finally to newness because of the efforts of those who wished to engage the process. During that teacher institute day, one math teacher in particular brought up our
performance of Cage’s 4’33’ and said that it was incredible, that after all these years she still remembered it as one of the most amazing things she saw done at the school.

**Part 7: Second through seventh year of teaching: learning collaboration**

At Northside our ability to be one from many occasionally hit glorious strides; the Cage performance is an example of that. But in order to get a real sense of the potential of bringing difference into collaboration I’ve had to wait and gauge the results of that process over long periods of time. From the second year to the seventh year that I was at Northside I was able to see this long-term experiment unfold.

Northside College Prep ran a block schedule. Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays students attended the courses that led them towards graduation, course that were required. On Wednesday though, students took colloquium. Colloquium was the hallmark of Northside’s curricular agenda. It was a day when seminars that had been designed by faculty were offered to students during the first half of the day for three hours each. The seminars were pass/fail and the teacher of that colloquium was not required to hold any particular expertise in that area of study. The teachers needed merely to be curious and willing to collaborate with the students to learn about whatever topic together. Teachers who taught information technology taught colloquiums in motorcycle repair and Dungeons and Dragons; English teachers taught cooking colloquiums, Social Science teachers taught colloquiums on baseball, yoga, Chicago history, and film genres. Even science teachers taught art colloquiums.

After the three-hour colloquium the students were dismissed. School was over in the middle of the work day, but the students often stayed at the school studying, making
art, rehearsing music, having club meetings, doing other school work, or simply just hanging out—after all, the faculty was required to stay for the afternoon and many of the students seemed to find the confines of the school as generative as some of the faculty did. This free time was an incredibly fruitful time for developing relationships and joint learning with students and colleagues at the school. It was during that two hours and a half after colloquium that the living curriculum was examined, affirmed, challenged and recalibrated. Of course, if kids wanted to go home and go to bed, they could; if they wanted to go hang out with their friends—even make trouble—they could do that too. Teachers also had a choice. If they wanted to lock themselves up in their classrooms and not see students the rest of the afternoon, they could. I, however, took my cue from Dr. Lalley’s office door and left it unlocked and open at all times.

In schools the vulnerable nature of time that hasn’t been designated to a specific task risks ending in either the highest forms of education or the most regrettable displays of poor decision making by young people. What Northside’s open-ended Wednesday afternoons proposes is that given the opportunity to live in that vulnerable, undesignated time, willing students and teachers will come together and use this free time to be generative and not destructive. On occasion behaviors that are usually deemed unproductive and in need of being “managed” will prove to be—in their unpredictability—the most generative or life giving opportunities for a student/ teacher interaction. For this, of course, the teacher must be willing to see student’s actions amorally as a means of communication and then be willing to interact with the student, not as an adult who is going to change the student, rather as one person who is willing to stand by a fellow person as they navigate the changes which they choose to make in their
lives. The teacher in essence stands in conversation alongside the student as opposed to in monologue above the student in some illusion of a status or knowledge hierarchy. This simple act of algebra puts the teacher on par with the student allowing both to regain their power to learn by defusing the urgency for either one to teach.

During my second year at Northside I conducted a colloquium course called “F”. It was a course that investigated failure. Through field trips, activities, film viewings, discussions and object making. We investigated all sorts of failure from breakdowns in societal and moral norms to things like rejection, nostalgia, broken heartedness, malfunction, repair, death, hell, extinction, curses, and lack of planning. We spent a whole class session looking at failure in baseball and how the rate is so high that it would be intolerable in any other occupation. If a baseball player is successful forty percent of the time, that athlete will be a first ballot Hall of Famer. I took my cue for this failure colloquium from a course that a professor at the Art Institute used to teach, called The Ethics and Aesthetics of Failure. It’s a course I never took, taught by a professor who—to this day—I find to be extraordinary in creating collaborative learning spaces that accentuate people’s differences, rather than squash them.

Matthew Goulish is a founding member of the performance group Goat Island. Although I didn’t take his failure course, he was my teacher at the Art Institute for two other courses during my undergraduate stint there. The first course was The Study of Anything, which was a course through which we developed methods of research for—well—anything, even extreme banalities. The second course was The Art of Crossing the Street, an experimental course that Matthew taught along with two other faculty members. This course Carol Becker (1999) later wrote was a means for art students to
understand that there are “multiple ways of being an artist” (p. 11). And it was exactly that, a bombardment of stimuli and opinions, which were collaged together, to hopefully stretch out the limitations of what the artist profession could be for each student in that class. Although I had not taken Matthew’s failure course, my other experiences with him, led me to freely borrow the initiating concept of the course. A course catalogue was printed every semester for the Northside students to make their colloquium selections. In my description for the course catalogue I credited Matthew’s failure course as the inspiration for the development of my failure course.

A few weeks into “F’s” duration the man who organized the colloquiums at Northside came into my classroom with another man named C.J.. It turns out that C.J. was Goat Island’s company manager at the time and he was surprised to see Matthew’s name in the course catalog during his visit to our high school. He told me that he was working with Performing Arts Chicago, a performance art advocacy group in the city and that they were interested in making a connection between a public school teacher and Goat Island through their educational programs. C.J. asked me if I would be interested in talking about it, given my interest in Matthew’s work and my having been one of his former students. I was and soon after we arranged a meeting with all five members of Goat Island and myself.

Going into this initial meeting, I wasn’t interested in Goat Island giving my students what is referred to in music education as a “master class”. I didn’t see my students as receptacles that needed to be taught anything from a professional. Instead I felt very strongly from the beginning that if this project was going to work, Goat Island needed to feel that my students were on par with them in terms of intelligence, invention,
and production. I intended to put my feelers out for this during our first meeting. This felt risky to me since I really admired the members of Goat Island and didn’t want to come off as arrogant or unappreciative. However at this point I seriously thought that the only way my students would be able to acknowledge their place as contemporary practitioners was to be taken seriously by artists who the world took very seriously.

When we were together the members of Goat Island asked me what I had in mind. I told them that maybe we could just eat together: Goat Island, the students, and myself. This seemed to delight the members of Goat Island. I further suggested that maybe we could have the students take field trips with members of the troupe; two students and one member of Goat Island would take a field trip, anywhere. This would all happen outside of school, only with students who were genuinely interested and it would be capped off at about ten to twelve kids. Chicago Arts Partnership in Education (CAPE), another arts advocacy group that specializes in arts integration was the major backer for this experiment. They provided me with support as well as research tools to be able to critically look at what we were doing during the length of this collaboration. The CAPE community ended up being an invaluable resource because they became an arena through which I could think critically about what we were doing as well as feel, both financially and morally supported. CAPE like Dr. Lalley sought every which way to say, “yes” to us. The members of Goat Island were—in fact—on board. They thought so highly of the students, they respected them enormously and went up and above all expectations of generosity and kindness in their manner of being with the group from Northside. For Goat Island there was—indeed—no doubt that the students from Northside were their contemporaries and in a short time the students began to recognize this also.
Students participated in performance workshops every year for five years with Goat Island. The students from Northside, the members of Goat Island, performance artist Judd Morrissey, poet Dan Beachy-Quick and myself co-wrote and published a book that contained a Renga or a 100 stanza haiku. We also made a film with Goat Island and a few years later in 2006 we performed at the OPENport performance festival as proxies for Goat Island. We then had a bookmaking session with them that ended up producing a set of small but intriguing sculptures. The members of Goat Island counted on the students’ and my presence at presentations of each of their performances, almost always giving us complimentary passes to the shows. Several times we were privy to performances that were only conducted for us. Goat Island asked us to be the audience for a dress rehearsal of a performance that they hadn’t performed in years. It was a full and wonderful run-through that felt like something had been pulled from a secret vault just for us. On a separate occasion all the members of Goat Island came to Northside for an after school critique of the students work. Our students showed them paintings, drawings, sculptures, conceptual works, works of music and comics. Goat Island, as always, were genuinely interested and came away from those exchanges as stimulated as the Northsiders did. For whatever it’s worth, no one, not the students, not Goat Island, nor I felt like we were working, rather we felt like we were doing everything the way it was meant to be done, as full blown living.

These exchanges extended beyond the time that we spent under the Northside/Goat Island collaborative umbrella, which is evident in the example of Bryan Saner, one of the principle members of the group. When the students and members of Goat Island took their field trips together, Bryan took his field trip with Cameron and Russ. He took
them to the Museum of Broadcast Communications, which used to reside at the Cultural Center in Chicago. I didn’t go on this trip, but parents consented that their children go on these trips alone with the members of Goat Island. Bryan showed Russ and Cameron old television shows from the archives of the museum; they rode to the museum together and also went out to eat together. A year later as Cameron was getting closer to graduation he reconnected with Bryan. Shortly after this he became Bryan’s assistant at Bryan’s carpentry and antique wood restoration service. For a few years thereafter I knew that if I wanted to get in touch with Cameron or Bryan I could contact either one and find the other. They were together, working together and Bryan was a mentor to Cameron.

Cameron now does this antique wood restoration for another person and sometimes on his own, and now Bryan has begun to take on other apprenticeships like the one he had with Cam.

Over the five years that the Northside/Goat Island collaborative ran more than fifty students participated in its activities. Most of those students have remained in active contact with me so I have been able to see their artistic careers continue. The bonds that the students and I formed were of mutual respect and serious consideration for each other’s work. To me, a person—in this case a student—is a contemporary practitioner not because of their status in the art world, but simply because they take themselves and their work seriously and they’ve chosen to unabashedly share that work with others. As the word parts of the term itself connote, a contemporary is someone who exists in a specific time (temp) and place (-ary) alongside someone else (con) regardless of status. And that co-existence is beside the fact that in today’s art world some would have us think that being “contemporary” is a privileged space that only practitioners who have paid their
dues may enter. Northside College Prep’s current art program continues to exhibit a high
degree of contemporary discourse that could stand alongside any other entity that would
claim to participate in that conversation. This leads me to the conclusion that all the
stakeholders in the endeavor to make a contemporary art community in an educational
setting contribute to its makings. The students bring their energy, inventiveness, and
fearlessness to the project and the teachers try their best not to get in the way.

**Conclusion of lecture: Second year of graduate school, learning middles**

I left Chicago in 2007. I miss it. It was an invigorating place where I rarely felt
like my work was laborious. This mainly had to do with the people I was privileged to
work with. I left because I was invited to apply to the Doctoral program in Art Education
at The Pennsylvania State University. I received a fellowship to make the move and after
much prayer and deliberation my family and I moved. During my second year of
graduate studies—after spending a year researching and writing about the pedagogical
propositions and practices of various performance artists—I serendipitously came upon
John Cage again. I was reading Martin Duberman’s extensive history of the experimental
school Black Mountain College thinking that I would find an account of Cage’s—now
legendary—involvement with the school. More than three hundred pages into the text I
realized that John Cage’s tenure at Black Mountain was but a blip in the schools twenty-
four year history. Cage officially taught a class during the summer session of 1948 and
then he followed that by being at the school two other times but not teaching anything
officially.
The first of these un-official summer sessions ends up being the time period that has propelled Cage’s short stint at Black Mountain into the annals of art folklore. Cage was scheduled to teach in the summer of 1952, however after seeing the course description, students thought the class was too focused on Cage’s own work and decided not to sign up for it. Cage then decided that he wouldn’t teach any courses that summer. Instead he spent those summer days striking up conversations with the Black Mountain community during all the meal times in the dining hall. One night after dinner he read through the entire *Doctrine of Universal Mind*, a booklet that was one of Cage’s introductions to Zen Buddhism. Zen—of course—became one of the major influences in Cage’s future practices. As Duberman (1972) tells it, Cage read the entire book including the notes and the preface to the book on that night in the dining hall. Many students hung out to listen, some thoroughly moved by the content of the text, others by Cage’s Zen gesture of reading an entire book out loud from cover to cover regardless of people’s reaction to it.

That same summer Cage put together what is now frequently pointed to as one of the first *Happenings*. Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, Mary Richards, Charles Olsen, Cage and some others held a performance in the same dining hall where Cage had done his reading. This undocumented performance has been described by various people as something akin to a multiple-ring circus. Rauschenberg played some records and showed images on slide projectors, Richards and Olsen read poetry, Cage climbed up a ladder and delivered a lecture and Merce Cunningham danced around the room and amongst the audience, while a little dog followed him around the space barking. At the conclusion of the performance girls came out of the kitchen and poured coffee into the
Styrofoam cups that had been placed on each attendant’s seat prior to the performance and which at this point had already become impromptu ashtrays for some of the smokers in the audience.

I can only imagine what it was like to experience this event. It must have felt chaotic and disorganized, not scholarly as some expect artist’s presentations to be. Duberman does a great job in his book of documenting various attendees’ recollections of the event. No one, not even the participants, remembered it exactly the same. On the other hand, what has been consistently reported is the seating arrangement. This seating arrangement is something that I cannot underscore enough, since it reveals something of my fascination with Cage’s pedagogical persona.

Imagine a square in which you have drawn a perfect “X”. It should look like four interlocking triangles. Now imagine that you could pull those triangles apart so that you created aisles in between the triangles. Imagine it from an aerial perspective and place seats in the triangles all facing the center of the “X” (see fig. 3).

What you are imagining is the seating schema for Cage’s performance at Black Mountain in 1952. What is important to note here is that the seats all faced each other and that no singular audience member could see the entire performance from where they were seated because the performance was happening all around them. This was unexpected to
some of the audience members who had expected whatever Cage was going to do to be presented in front of them the way that it would be in a traditional lecture or piece of theatre. The audience needed to constantly readjust their body to see what was happening, but in doing this they would involuntarily turn their backs on something that was going on in another part of the space. The individuals experiencing this needed to make a choice. They might have needed to ask, “Should I watch Rauschenberg or Cage?”; “Should I pay attention to the slides or should I watch Merce and the dog?” Whatever choice the audience member made would make significant alterations in their experiencing of other parts of the presentation. It was simply impossible to see it all.

This Black Mountain performance was the first of many multi-centered artworks that Cage created where he was proposing a pedagogical challenge to his audiences. Surely the move to have multiple things happening beyond the scope of an audience member’s singular perception was not necessarily or intentionally pedagogical; however, the proposal that much phenomena occurs simultaneously and that humans have a natural shortcoming that inhibits them from seeing it all, experiencing it all, and knowing it all, is—in fact—humbly educational.

Some of Cage’s most famous works, including his silent piece, can be looked at through this pedagogical proposal. Countless times Cage reiterated that his intention was never to trick his audience or to be an instigator. I think that’s why Cage always managed to keep a serious face while performing even the most ludicrous looking actions. Through his ability to point in multiple directions simultaneously Cage “imitate[d] nature in her manner of operation” (Cage, 1967, p. 31) enabling a temporary suspension of his authorship in order to participate in the perception of his own works, not simply as the
creator, but also as an audience member. Cage was interested in the newness that emerged in the situationality of what was happening in the moment of the performance, that’s why he simply bracketed activity in his performances and then allowed certain elements of chance to make the work appear. Like Gregory Bateson in my introduction, many of Cage’s works are essentially metalogues, in that Cage brought forth some thing and also stood outside of it.

From Cage and Bateson’s metalogical devices I borrow similar permissions about learning that have encouraged me to continue to feed off of the unconventional educational experiences that I described in the previous seven sections. For me, Cage and Bateson come across as participants in a conversation, not teachers delivering some polished content. They enjoy the element of surprise that their audiences’ difference introduces to the bulk of what is happening. Bateson would define the metalogue as a “conversation about some problematic subject” whose “structure…as a whole is also relevant to the same subject” (p. 1), meaning that the content and the form are intertwined irrevocably, and that in some way the form even creates the content.

And this is what my idea of good pedagogy is; a creative work performed by a collaborative (you can call it a classroom if you wish) whose participants are equally invested in constructing the form and the content of the project at hand. And that form and content is not predetermined by standardized objectives, aspirations, or prejudices that can’t possibly take into account the everydayness of the participants who are undertaking that specific learning project. In this pedagogical collaborative the student—as well as the teacher—will have the freedom to deviate, fail, prioritize, astheticize, relate, play, collaborate and exist as multiple individual centers, with their own orbiting
auras (of which other centers are a part of) that do not destroy others even when situated in close proximity to others.

Edmund Husserl (1970), who is often cited as the grandfather of phenomenology, points to the body as “exhibiting itself in multiplicities” (p. 161) that only appear to be in harmony because of some corrective act of perception. What he means here is that perception is consistently adjusted to navigate the potential horror or overwhelmingly distracting nature of multiplicities. Husserl proposes that a break in this corrective act of perception is needed in order for the multiplicities to become evident and that we avoid these breaks in our perception, often times because of our isolation. In other words, if we are isolated we shield ourselves form having to encounter other’s differences and our own lack of tolerance for those differences. We can see Husserl’s move from the realm of one’s own body, experiencing one’s own experiences, towards something that illustrates these encounters with difference more clearly in his own words:

But instead of inquiring further in the sphere of our own intuitions, let us turn our attention to the fact that in our continuously flowing world-perceiving we are not isolated but rather have, within it, contact with other human beings. Each one has his perceptions, his presentifications, his harmonious experiences, devaluation of his certainties into mere possibilities, doubts, questions, illusions. But in living with one another each one can take part in the life of the others. Thus in general the world exists not only for the isolated men but for the community of men; and this is due to the fact that even what is straightforwardly perceptual is communalized. (p. 163).
Husserl continues to elaborate on this communal interaction with difference suggesting that everyone—from their individual position—sees their own horizon, and that that horizon is always equally distant even if individuals continue to move towards it; meaning that the amount of what we can experience is infinite even though it can only be taken in measured doses. If we all then have this experience and we can remain conscious of the fact that everyone else also experiences limitlessly, although still limited, then we can remain aware that everyone can act as both a teacher and a student because everyone is their own center and everyone else is in everyone else’s field of perception, meaning they are part of other’s peripheries. Although at the actual time of “looking” some of us may be unperceivable to each other, it only takes a simple maneuver, through an act of will and courage, in order to notice each other. This is the move that I will make everyday, regardless of whether or not I ever step into another classroom, demonstrate another technique, make another work of art, or utter another word.
Chapter 6

Contra Cuento, a conclusion.
When I first started this writing project in order to be given a degree that said I was a doctor (or teacher) of philosophy, I never imagined that I would be writing about the complexities of how I identify myself. Ever since I was a child I’ve been asked the question, “what are you?” and answering this question throughout my life has become an intricate exercise in survivalist instincts, wit, philosophical calisthenics, formal and informal research, paradox, and ultimately construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. In other words, answering the question “what are you” has become my work.

I now have six pat responses that I use to answer the interchangeable questions “what are you?” and “where are you from?”. I say these questions are interchangeable not because I believe that identity and place are inextricably linked, but because these two questions usually share the same aim, that of classifying me. In no particular order I select from the following essentialist responses when addressing the query about what I am or where I am from:

“I am Mexican.”

“I am Mexican-American.”

“I am Latino.”

“I am from Chicago.”

“I am American.”

“My parents were born in Mexico, but I was born in Chicago.”
I usually use my answers in tandem because no single answer from the above list seems to suffice. I give one answer and when whoever is asking inevitably gives me that incredulous expression which begs for clarification; I offer a second response in order to solidify my first statement. I say, “I’m from Chicago…I mean, my parents were born in Mexico, but I was born in Chicago.”

Although the answers to the questions about what I am or where I come from are readily available to me, these easy answers are exactly that, easy answers. The answers are a manner of moving along in the world or should I say allowing the world to move along. I recognize that whoever is asking is merely collecting information in order to draw a conclusion about what they think I am, and what potential role I might play in their life. I attempt to be as generous as I can with my response, but in the end my efforts feel futile since most people don’t spend enough time with my creative works or me in order to complicate their assumptions about what I am or what they know about where I’m from. The what are you/where are you from exchange is a short performance enacted—sometimes unknowingly—by two well intentioned participants who simply don’t have the time to perform the considerably longer, more precarious work of formulating a collection of exchanges, which point—maybe not at the answer—but in the direction of the answer. Developing what is conventionally known, as a close-relationship—with all of its thrills and vulnerabilities—is a rare thing, which is reserved for a small fraction of the people that I know and work with.

I locate the above scenario in the realm of performance because after so many years of repeating it—with Latino(as) and non-Latino(as) alike—I’ve come to understand that the nuances and difficulties of these “getting-to-know-you” encounters are
profoundly and irretrievably linked to their relationship with measured units of time, or what, as an artist, I’ve identified in this dissertations introduction as the *materiality of time*. Unlike the innocuously clichéd “quality time” that pretends to be the panacea for a spectrum of relationship troubles from the parent/child relationship to the prejudices that multicultural education attempts to patch up, the material of time and its partner “duration” in an art context, is not morally specific and can be engaged like any other artist’s material, such as paper, videotape, or the body. The material of duration—as can be seen from the conceptual art examples to the teacher examples I give in this dissertation—can be manipulated and accumulated; analyzed, challenged, politicized and formalized. There is a caveat though: the material of duration is different from most other artist’s materials because its ephemeral patina makes it more likely to be ignored, or become what Martin Heidegger (1962) describes as “ready-to-hand” (p.102), meaning so useful and intuitive that it operates regardless of any special contemplation. The material of duration exists constantly in the background of our everyday workings and interactions. This ready-to-handness of the material’s substance and malleability doesn’t stop its metamorphosis though. No matter how infinitesimal and immeasurable the change is, the material of duration is alive with flux and the conceptual artist merely dips into this continuous stream of duration, accentuates one particular part of it for the world to observe and then waits, sometimes—even—becoming a member of the artwork’s audience.

My work as a performance artist has been enacted primarily as a teacher and through an increasingly conscious interaction with the material of duration. An educational endeavor led by me is usually an open laboratory where works of
Relationality are collaboratively created, critiqued, and promoted by all the stakeholders in the given project (e.g. students, teachers, parents, colleagues, administrators, etc). Relationality—also a primary goal in my creative works—is an umbrella term under which I include art, research, and teaching. Whether they’re artworks in the conventional product-oriented sense or more conceptual works, such as pedagogy as art, I’m interested in how my performance sensibility and my proclivity toward improved social interactions meet and affect the people who come in contact with them.

A work of relationality is much like a mere relationship, except that in the project of relationality the intentions involved in making artworks are transposed to the mere relationship in order to improve its modes of operation and their capacity to create newness. If, like Graeme Sullivan (2005) says, “one’s art practice, teaching profession, and research projects, all operate within a similar set of informing conditions and a sense of inquiry, and you are never quite sure of the outcome” (p. xxii), then it can be said that relationality aims to place the ambivalence and inherent pedagogy of relationships in a research and art context. I’m not implying that the relationship becomes objectified, rather that there is an intentional effort on behalf of at least one of the relationship’s participants to help the relationship straddle the art/research/life threshold.

Relationality is a messy enterprise. Unlike the relational aesthetic practices (Bourriaud, 2002) that I mention in chapter one, relationality strives to be different by not focusing on how much the relational interruption affects the art. This practice, rather seeks to investigate the reverse—that is—how the interjection of an art mode of operation can affect relationships. This approach makes the material of duration invaluable to the process of relationality, mainly because of the way that attention to time and its
purposeful use, accentuates the prevalence of difference and situationality in interactions amongst people, places, things, and the spaces in-between them. My former teacher, author Matthew Goulish (2000) proposes one way of working with the material of duration is through “slow thinking”, proposing that “in fact, some things happen which one can only perceive with slow thinking” (p. 82).²⁵

During the “what are you/where are you from” encounter that I describe at the beginning of this chapter, I find myself situated, not only as one of the performers in that exchange, but also as a participant in a pedagogical situation. Whoever wants to know what I am or where I come from has constructed—in the normative sense—a teacher/student bifurcation. My first instinct, as I stated above, is to register within that normative sense and provide an answer. The problem is that my answer usually doesn’t fall in any recognizable category because it’s a stammering, multi-pronged bricolage of types.

For argument’s sake, let’s say that I identified myself with just two types, such as Mexican and American. This hybridized “new” type, the Mexican-American, is extremely complex and under-defined. Contrary to what the term “Chicano” allows, my review of the literature—of what has been recognized as Chicano/a Studies since the 1970’s (Norriega, 2001)—has uncovered an unfathomable rhizome, meaning without a

²⁵ It may appear that when I’m speaking about the material of duration I am strictly speaking about the act of extending duration. However it is important to note at this point, although my examples—especially in regards to relationality—tend to go towards the prolongation of the material of duration, it is very possible for the material of duration to be enacted in short spurts. What is important is not the length of the duration, but the attention to the duration as in Goulish’s “slow thinking”.
“genetic axis” (Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F., 1987, p. 12), of difference that proposes multiple, almost incalculable variations of what a Mexican-American or Chicano can be.

Understandably most of the literature situates the Mexican American or Chicano/a in the Southwest United States; being from Illinois, that has not been my experience. So as it is, I fall into a relatively new space that exists within the ongoing formulation of what it could mean to be a Chicano. The what-are-you-encounters that I’ve had are a testament to the existence of that unknown, underexplored, contentious space. And as it is, I’m not interested in navigating that space as a pedagogue/artist that subscribes to the normative pedagogical question and answer modes, rather I want to highlight the performance that is occurring in that particular instance, filtering it through the material of duration. I want to activate that space for pedagogy as contemporary art and perform within that space the role of the “liminal servant”. The pedagogue as contemporary artist as liminal servant falls under Charles Garoian’s (1999) description for the teacher under that same role, “function[ing] as [a] cultural provocateur, similar to performance artists, operating in the breach between schooled culture and the diverse content that students bring to the classroom from their respective cultural backgrounds at home, in their neighborhoods, and from popular culture” (p. 43). Garoian also sees the potential striation that can occur in and around this in-between space. After identifying ethnography, language, resistance to cultural domination, community, the body’s interaction to technological culture and the body being made explicit as six pedagogical strategies for a performance pedagogy, Garoian goes on to point out that much like Deleuze and Guattari’s image of the rhizome, these six pedagogical strategies “provide
interconnected possibilities for challenging cultural codes and re-presenting the body” (p. 46). Its sheer complexity makes it appealing as an art preoccupation.

At first glance, the thought of unpacking multiple individual’s multifaceted identities through this practice of relationality appears to be an extensive task, bordering on anthropology. If this were the case, the academic parameters of an anthropological project would put this activity on par with the relational aesthetics described in chapter one and even the “getting-to-know-you” exchange that I describe in my opening paragraph of this chapter. What I mean is that anthropology is an academic process by which the researcher seeks to uncover either fixed information of a historical and comparative nature or prefabricated intellectual constructions, such as art. This complicates the issue on ethical grounds because it can potentially make some of the participants in the relational project subjects of those leading the project, such as the MFA student, the relational aesthetic artist, or—in an pedagogical encounter—the teacher. Looking at what Victor Turner (1985) says about the anthropologist approach to performance, the material of duration is once again introduced as the device by which this fact-gathering preoccupation can be disrupted by both difference and situationality. Turner notes that,

> Anthropologists are more concerned with *stasis* than with *dynamis*, with texts, institutions, types, protocols, “wiring”, custom, and so on than with the how of performance, the shifting, evanescent, yet sometimes utterly memorable relationships that develop unpredictably among actors, audience, text, and…other situational variables. (p. xii)
So if the manipulating of the material of duration is—in fact—a performance than it must take into account that “the Other [which is] what I myself am not” according to Levinas (1987, p. 83), and of which I am one also, is renewed by their state of *dynamis*, or flux which necessitates that the relational task be extended indefinitely. The hint here is that pedagogy is ongoing and beyond the barriers of, even, pedagogy itself.

The ethical dilemma, of course, is that of aestheticizing “The Other” by designating him or her as elements of one’s conceptual art practice. So, being hyperaware of myself in the moment when I am in proximity to that which “I myself am not” is a political, artistic, and spiritual position, which helps me, not to define “The Other” or even to get to know “The Other”, but to further uncover aspects of my own identity that previously may have been dormant or even nonexistent. These are dynamic gestures filled with uncertainty and that’s why they require the manipulation of the material of duration. That’s why they require art.

My collaborations with students have taken years and frequently lack clear markers indicating their beginnings or conclusions. Some of those collaborations are still going, except we don’t identify as teacher and students anymore, but rather as friends. The collaborations have transcended the parameters of school years, academic departments, seniority structures, generational gaps and even geography. Although this has proven consistent in my personal work, it is important to accentuate the fact that the material of duration doesn’t always indicate a preoccupation with extended or prolonged periods of time. In fact, working with the *material of duration* is more specifically acknowledge by the artist’s attention to the material than what the actual duration is.
In this dissertation I have presented various investigations in the conceptual use of the *material of duration* through the pedagogical gesture, both in an embodied and a metaphysical way. My intention was to analyze the complexities of what Sharon Todd (2003) calls the “unassimilable and unknowable alterity” (p. 9) of The Other that I represent in my personal history of learning situations. In other words, my hope was to be able to present various answers to the question “what are we, together—as artists, as pedagogues?”

The embodied examples and the metaphysical observations have been based on portions of a very long narrative. This narrative is a more nuanced—however frayed—answer to the question “what are you?” By using this term, “frayed”, I’m admitting to the multiple strands that extend themselves from what I intended to present. My hope is to continue to tease out several of those turns—through my art and my teaching—and present them through a continuous autoethnographic strategy that falls under what Tara Yosso (2006) called “critical race counterstories” (p. 10). Yosso describes the counterstory or what I’ve renamed the *contra-cuento* (counter-tale) as

A method of recounting the experiences and perspectives of racially and socially marginalized people…Indeed, Communities of Color cultivate rich and continuing traditions of storytelling. Recognizing these stories and knowledges as valid and valuable data, counterstorytellers challenge the majoritarian stories that omit and distort the histories and realities of oppressed communities (p. 10).
It is my hope that this dissertation will continue to enact what has been retold in these pages, not just as a means to replicate a strategy, but moreso as a means to “fake intelligence until intelligence emerges.

A final thought on John Cage

Early on in my research for this project I came upon the literature surrounding the teaching and creative works of the American composer John Cage. Prior to this project, I had repeatedly heard about Cage’s work but never actually heard anything that he had composed. Having heard of Cage’s work, but not actually the work itself, is not—I have found—such a rare occurrence. When discussing my research with people who I would consider highly literate on these topics, most people say, “oh yeah, he made that silent piece, right?” To which I always respond “Yes, 4’ 33.” The irony that neither one of us experienced 4’33, but yet can formulate an intelligent discussion about it is what originally drew me to Cage. Although I didn’t know much about Cage, the nonsense and puzzlement of his composition, with its possibility for multiple interpretations lured me in his direction.

Since I was also looking for models of pedagogy and since I had heard that John Cage was one of the pivotal players in the educational experiments that took place at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, I decided to look there first. It didn’t take long to realize that—although important in constructing the legend of Cage—the brevity of his residencies at Black Mountain College ultimately diffuses some of the aura that most surveys of contemporary art usually afford his contributions (Duberman, 1972). At that point I decided that I needed to do an expansive investigation of Cage’s pedagogical
endeavors to see if there was anything in his creative acts that mimicked the playful and pedagogical spirit of that well-known—although minimally heard—silent piece. In order for this to happen, I needed to expand my definition of what a creative act was in the life and work of John Cage. This switch wasn’t difficult for me, since I had been grappling with this same semantic restructuring within my own creative practices. At this point in my teaching and making I understood acts of art to be, as Duchamp would put it, “that of living: each second, each breath [as] a work which is inscribed nowhere, which is neither visual nor cerebral” (Cabanne, 1971, p.72). For me the act of making had become much more conceptual and I was looking for kinship in the histories that I had been introduced to through my schooling.

“Go to the dead guys and see what they say”, remember? That was what I was frequently advised by my professors while doing my undergraduate degree at SAIC, an institution that provides unlimited access to a world renowned art museum for its students. In looking for a pedagogical model that reinforced my idea that teaching could be a work of conceptual or performance art (meaning an ephemeral, non-object oriented practice that focused on the movement of ideas), John Cage fit the bill perfectly. Although Cage is predominately known as a composer, he is equally noted for his writing, his performance art, his conceptual art, his lecturing, his teaching, his involvement with mycology, and his self-admitted amateur Zen practice (Cage, 1961; Kostelanetz, 1987; Revill, 1992; Cage & Retallack, 1996).

I dug deeper into John Cage’s oeuvre, motivated by the hypothesis that I might uncover pedagogical suggestions in Cage’s work that were more generous and less esoteric than the proposal I attributed above to Duchamp, that the mere act of breathing
was art. What I found in Cage’s pedagogical endeavors and contributions was a proposal for learning that went beyond knowledge delivery and reception and into that unpredictable realm of collaborative knowledge construction (Lucero, 2009). For example, emphasizing Cage’s multimodality in terms of form, proposes a counter-intuitive method to the production-based model of education which seeks to process students and their learning as through an assembly line such as the one Ivan Illich (1970) describes when he states that “the pupil is thereby ‘schooled’ to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new” (p. 1). Cage, who admitted to admiring Illich’s ideas about schooling was motivated by what he recognized as the “idea…to keep the process of learning and the interest in learning going—not stopping it and not institutionalizing it (Cage in Kostelanetz, 1987, pp. 244-45).

In combination, all of Cage’s modes of operation echo some of the same ecological substructures that are peppered throughout many of the performance, conceptual, and multimodal artists, curriculum theorists and writers that I describe in this dissertation. I define the “ecological substructure” here as dependent on the notions of duration, silence (or stillness), multiplicity and difference that are absent from my “what are you/ where are you from” experience delineated earlier in this chapter.

What I mean by ecology of operation here is a MO that is considerate of and responsible to the multiplicity of factors surrounding and imbedded in acts of making and learning. An ecology of operation is a long-term, slow, engagement that foregrounds the durationality and situationality of relationships (between human things and non-human things alike) in order to enact a more ethical, reflexive, and generative position. Stephen
Bottoms (2007) would describe “ecological research [as] literally a life’s work” (p. 9) adding that unfortunately “the economy of knowledge acquisition is too often tied to short-termism”. By this, Bottoms is inferring that there is no responsible shortcut towards an ecology of operation and heavily sites Gregory Bateson’s *Ecology of Mind* to make his point.

**Conclusion as beginning**

In this dissertation I have outlined auto-ethnographic narratives alongside theoretical excursions. I’ve delineated my upbringing as a Mexican-American youth going through American schooling and eventually becoming a teacher, as well as a practicing conceptual artist. Then I paired that with the MO investigations of various artists who practice conceptually, and rupture expectations about pedagogy and art with an exuberant amount of joy. This dissertation project attempts to reconcile my personal proclivity for Western Art traditions such as Fluxus, Conceptual Art, and Performance Art with the *emancipatory*, presence-heavy, caring, generative, situational, local, relational acts of conceptualism and pedagogy that usurp the explication-heavy pedagogy (Ranciere, 1991) that is so dominate today in many forms of education.

A few years into my teaching career I began to get request to lead teachers in professional development sessions. Several universities around the city of Chicago began to ask me to come and speak to their art education classes. I met many elementary, high school and college teachers during my seven years teaching in the Chicago Public Schools who came from all levels of experience and distinguished backgrounds. Everybody had a different story. One thing that I consistently heard though was how
much—and how rewarding it was—to be a teacher who learns from his or her students. Although being a teacher who also utters this cliché, frequently singing my student’s praises, it has always been a little troubling to tell others that my students teach me a lot, because I wish there was another way that I could say this so that it wouldn’t sound like I was just performing the usual teacher self-sacrificial hyperbole. My struggle around this “student-teaches-teacher” dilemma has forced me to ask some very important—and ultimately—increasingly generative questions around my teaching practice. One thing I ask myself as a teacher, “yes, but what do you make with your students?” This question is meant to ask, what kind of learning (understood as a conceptual thing—a noun—rather than a verb) is a teacher making with their students? The example of John Cage placing himself in the role of the spectator for his own concerts serves as a good way to elucidate what I’m pointing towards in this closing paragraph. Like Cage who orchestrated a situation that would allow him to not have to conduct, play, or even predict the outcomes of the concert, I want to formulate a pedagogical situation where I can essentially remove myself from the dictation of the learning action and place myself alongside my fellow creators as makers of that “learning”. Ironically the “student-teaches-teacher” reversal of power is not that much better then the “teacher-teaches-student” sequence since it only reverses the hierarchy of power and never fully eliminates it. What I mean is that whenever I hear a teacher say this, they are usually saying it from a well-meaning emancipatory position. A position that aims to endow the student with a certain degree of agency and to dismantle parts of the hierarchy that has for so long taken student agency away from the students. What is being ignored most often is how the teacher now positions him or herself as the subjugated one. Teaching at the high school level, getting
up at six in the morning, to spend the best eight hours of my day “teaching” teenagers had to be a mutually enriching activity for me, as well as my students or else I wouldn’t have done if for seven years and I wouldn’t have felt sad when I left that practice to go back to graduate school. Even now, teaching at the university level, I get excited about my opportunities to teach because as an artist I’m interested in what kind of “making” my students and I will collaborate on as we attempt to learn and collaboratively construct our learning as a conceptual art project over time. Constructing the learning is not located in a building, or with a specific population for me. It is simply about beginning a conversation where everyone’s contributions are worth looking at, even to the extent where they are put on display as artworks. My interest in the classroom practice is focused on the situationality of how the class—including myself—performs the classroom. How do we come together to make something, while retaining our individual integrity? This multilayered conversation is my work and without this very simple, however dynamic, reciprocity, I would have nothing to write this dissertation about.
References:


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Ines de la Cruz, J. (1709). *Poemas de la unica poetisa Americana*. Valencia: Impressa
Antonio Bordazar.

Ines de la Cruz, J. (1714). *Poemas de la unica poetisa Americana, musa dezima, Soror Juana Ines de la Cruz, religiosa professa en el monasterio de San Geronimo de la Imperial ciudad de Mexico: Que en Vario metros, idiomas, y estilos, fertiliza varios assumptos*. Madrid: Imprenta Real.


Richardson, J. (2010). Interventionist art education: Contingent communities, social


APPENDICES
Appendix A

ARTE 501: Issues in art education/
Contemporary art practice as pedagogy


Too too – Much much is a work that follows my directive “Energy: Yes! Quality: No!”.
There are two ‘topics’ in this work. The first is linked to the motif: beverage cans, the consumption, the Excess while the second topic relates to the role of the artist who always wants to do too much, without coming to the essence, but who quite contrarily
disregards the essence, who really does way too much. These two topics come together – nevertheless – in one form. The Form Too Too – Much Much. The form of this work is also a manifesto that confirms that the artist’s practice is neither pure theory nor pure practice. The work of the artist should definitely go beyond the theory and practice. (Hirschhorn, 2010)

Greetings

Welcome to a course that is also an artwork. Pointing to one of the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn’s working tenets, “Energy: Yes! Quality: No!” let us forget about succeeding in this course and let us concentrate on generating the most possible energy out of our time together. You may take this call to “energy” as some sort of descriptor, but let us not close the possibilities of this course too soon. In fact, if there is a descriptor that should be looked at, let it be the one about openness that I just posited over Hirschhorn’s “energy” tenet. Let this course be open and let us travel in and out of it forever.

Logistics

This course meets on Tuesday evenings, from 5 to 7:30, at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. Our meeting room for the spring semester of 2011 will be room 240, although on the first class session we will have visited another (more open space) and on the second class we will have met for dinner in the instructor’s home. I am the instructor of this course, Jorge Lucero, and I can be contacted in a variety of ways. If you wish to see me in person, you can visit my office during the lunch hour (12-1 pm) on most Tuesdays. My office—room 123—is found in the Art and Design Building on Peabody Drive. If you find this singular meeting hour inconvenient to your schedule, please feel free to set up an appointment with me at an alternative time. I would be more than happy to make suitable accommodations to meet with you. You can contact me through email at jlucero@illinois.edu.

A note on the syllabus

This syllabus is tentative and subject to change. As much as I would like to say that I know how this semester is going to go, I can’t. The syllabus you are currently reading is an estimated guess that is being written weeks prior to meeting you. Because of the logistical necessity that is teacher preparation, I have been put in the awkward (although familiar) position of determining what your particular needs will be during this course even though I know very little about you. I would like you to be aware that
although I will tinker with the syllabus as the semester unfolds, I will make no changes that will come as a surprise to you. Changes will only be made with the benefit of the group in mind. Everything will be thoroughly explained and all reasoning for the changes will be brought before the group. If at any point you feel that an alteration that I have made to our course of study has been made unfairly or (worse) unnecessarily, please speak to me about this matter privately. I will do my best to address your concern and when appropriate use your suggestions to improve the pedagogical and creative experience of everyone involved in this course.

Although there are parts of this syllabus that I transplant from other courses I’ve taught, I have paid very detailed attention to make sure that every decision executed via this document are integral and with your best interest in mind. It may seem odd to see this level of meta-awareness in something as quotidian as a syllabus, but that’s exactly the point: let us start, even from this syllabus, paying closer attention to the gestures we make in the world, particularly the ones we identify as pedagogical and/or aesthetic.

Course Description

This course didn’t exist before now. You and I will describe the course. What premise should we begin with though? Let us begin with this one:

*Art can be made through the medium that is pedagogy.*

For this we will need definitions of what art and pedagogy are. Conjuring up these definitions is certainly a graduate-degree-worthy task—even, one might say, an impossible task—but let us not be deterred by the grandiose sounding nature of such a challenge. In fact, let us be proud in stumbling towards the wrong answer, repeatedly, and with abandon.

In the poster that advertised this course I included this description:

Recently there’s been a move on behalf of some contemporary artists to take their work and working methods into more public, civic minded, spheres. From large format international invitational, such as Documenta (Germany), to grassroots projects such as The Nomadic Studio of the
Stockyard Institute in Chicago, artists are practicing their work, thinking about the idea of the “public” as medium.

This pedagogical and political turn can be found in artworks ranging from performance art to curatorial projects. Students interested in blurring the disciplinary lines of art related discourses, such as studio practices, art history, art activism, design, curating, and art education are encouraged to join us.

Some topics we’ll touch on: conceptual art (chance, failure, the ready-made, and the situation); relational aesthetics; performance pedagogy; interdisciplinarity; visual studies; art as civic engagement; aesthetics of generosity; installation as social art practice; ethics and ecology; grassroots collaboration; interventionist practice; the everyday; durational art practices; the public vs. the private; and the studio as site of contention and creation.

It’s true; we are not the first to travel this path. There is a scattered history, which we will examine. We will try to see if there is a “language” or system that can act as a foundation for something that we will do. The first ten weeks of this course are set.

We will read and we will meet.

We will look at art.

We will drink coffee and we will talk.

We will take notes and get inspired. We’ll share our notes and our inspirations.

And then we will rest.

The last four weeks of class we will do something. What will that be? Something generated from our ten-week germination.

---

**An additional thought on openness**

My intention for this course is that it be of utmost use to you. If at any point it is not, I welcome an open dialogue of ideas in order to make this semester’s work of maximum
benefit to you as your pursue—not only a career—but a lifestyle as an artists, educator, researcher, etc. I have a strict policy against wasting time, yours and mine. If there is ever anything that we are investigating in class which you find to be consuming time unnecessarily please do not hesitate to let me know. This will not reflect poorly on you, as long as you communicate with me in a respectful and professional manner. Your observations about the course will only be used to improve the course and never taken in a negative way against you or your classmates. This is a promise, which I’ve decided to put in writing so that you can hold me to it. This is your education after all and I want to help you make it life enhancing and generative. With an open discourse we will, not only be able to learn from this course, but from everything that feeds into and out of the ideas taught in this class.

Course Activities

1. The first day of class will be fully facilitated by me. Just come prepared to work and please dress comfortably, i.e. wear sneakers.

2. The second day of class, will be partially facilitated by me in the form of dinner at the Lucero’s house. For this day, please have the syllabus read and marked with 1.) Something you found interesting in the syllabus. 2.) Something you found confusing/troubling/or downright wrong. On the second day, we will also select:
   
   a. facilitating groups: groups of 2 or 3 students who will facilitate classroom discussions and activities around that week’s “reading cluster”.
   
   b. reading clusters: a selection of readings (see below) around a specific strand of contemporary art practice as pedagogy. These readings have been collated from a variety of sources and are meant to compliment and contrast each other.

   c. contemporary artists presentation (CAP) topics and dates: each individual student will select an artist(s) whose work/life can make contributions to our conversation (see list below) and make a twenty minute presentation on their subject. Each student will select a date for presentation and more then one student can present on any given day.

   d. and assigned facilitating dates: these are the dates that each facilitating group will lead us through a reading cluster. Only one group may go per day, with the exception of a day when we have a low number of CAPs, in which case we’ll have to facilitating groups present that week.
3. **Contemporary artists presentations (CAP)** are individual presentations that will attempt to situate our conversation(s) historically as much as possible. The list below is a sporadic—albeit aligned with the Western cannon—selection of contemporary (or late Modern) artists who have worked with some of the same themes that will surface throughout the semester. Each student in this class will be asked to select an artist from this list and give a twenty-minute presentation that stems from that particular artist. It is important to notice my use of the directive “stems” here, since it indicates that the entire presentation need not be dedicated to the work, history, narrative, or interpretation of that artist’s work. The idea is to use this artist as a means to begin your research. At which point you may need to have a conversation with either a classmate or me in order to see where your presentation is headed. This list is not comprehensive and I am certainly open to modifying it with your suggestions, however keep in mind that the objective of these presentations is to begin from a significant artist who has modeled a manner of working through some of these philosophical questions.

**CAP List**

1. Gabriel Orozco
2. Lygia Clark
3. John Cage
4. Bruce Mau
5. Andy Warhol
6. Adrian Piper
7. Miranda July
8. Joseph Beuys
9. Liam Gillick
10. Georges Bataille
11. Luis Camnitzer
12. Thomas Hirschhorn
13. Coco Fusco
14. Suzanne Lacy
15. Guy Debord
16. Marcel Broodthaers
17. Tim Rollins and K.O.S.
18. Yoko Ono
19. Rirkrit Tiravanija
20. Group Material

4. Most **Course Readings** will be distributed electronically through library reserves. Expect to have somewhere between 60 and 100 pages to read every week from week two to week ten. These readings have been compiled from the various histories, commentaries, interviews, essays and creative works that loosely surround our main topic, contemporary art practice as pedagogy. I have grouped
the readings into nine subsections (clusters), which we will cover over an eight-week period. The clusters are:

-- Studio Practice: Where does art take place?
-- Ecology: the artist as active(ist).
-- Identity Practice: who I am and who they think I am and who I can make them think I am.
-- Conceptual Art: non aesthetic, non intention, non sense.
-- Relational Aesthetics: be near to me
-- Exhibition: art in the world and in the world of art.
-- The Artist as Philosopher: from genius to intellectual (wink-wink).
-- Play: but seriously.
-- Partitions and their interpenetration: together apart.

Since the collection of clusters exist as a rhizome and not in the linear manner listed above, we will not necessarily work through these reading clusters in this particular order. Instead, working in groups of two to three participants, we will use one class period per cluster to activate and discuss that set of readings. Of course, the readings will have had to be read the week preceding that particular class session. As mentioned above, on the second day of class, groups will be formed, reading clusters will be selected and dates for facilitating discussion and activities around each groups selected reading clusters will be chosen. The reading list is found at the end of this document as Appendix A.

Readings are mandatory. None of the reading for this class is useless. Everything I ask you to read will be in line with our joint trajectory and will be absolutely useful. Occasionally, given the overall spirit of the class, some reading may be eliminated or replaced. I will not police your reading either. I will expect you to have every reading done and to be ready to participate in whatever the facilitating group for that reading cluster has prepared. The texture of this class is dependent on your full and wholehearted participation. Come prepared with questions (even if we don’t get to them), notes (even if they’re just for yourself), and possibilities (even if it isn’t your turn to facilitate). Remember that we are all equally teachers and students in this endeavor and we should be seeking to share our discoveries with each other. If by chance—although I don’t foresee this happening—you need
help completing the readings or diving into them, then I will create writing assignments that will help you to get the most out of the readings.

5. **Picture book.** Compose a book of no less then 200 separate collages. Keep your pages in a folder; do not use an already-bound book. Your collages needn’t be aesthetic and they needn’t be labor-intensive. They needn’t be composed of multiple images and they needn’t conform to any “definition” of what you’ve learned a collage is. Try to pretend that you invented the idea of collage; be irreverent in this way. Your book must be composed as one whole work, although it need not “read” linearly, literally, or follow—even a suggested—narrative. In fact, it is more generous of you—and for you—to stay away from these types of conventions. Your collages must refrain from using words to explicate. Letters or texts may only be used as images. Although it doesn’t matter how you actually construct your pages (by hand, digitally, with assistants), towards the end of your process all of your pages must be digitized (turned into one 200 page PDF, that is). Depending on your method, it might be in your best interest to digitize as you go along, but this is up to you. Once you have your PDF you should have your book printed in black and white, 8.5”x 11”, on publisher grade paper, with a color “Perfect Bound”-cover from the online publisher Lulu.com*. Please have at least two printed, one will be for you and will be a gift to someone else in the class. If you do not wish to have a copy for yourself, then just print one (for someone else in the group). Each book will cost you less than ten dollars and the entire online process is very user friendly. I can do a demonstration if the group needs it. This book is due on April 19th, 2011. Since the actual printing process can take from ten to fourteen days, you should plan on finishing the book and sending it to the publisher with enough anticipation. Two hundred pages may seem like a daunting goal for such a short period of time (essentially eleven weeks), but I suggest that you devise a plan, which takes into consideration the time parameter, and then execute it. This work can be executed over ten weeks or it can be done in ten hours, the process depends on whether or not you’ve planned accordingly.

You determine any parameter that has not been delineated in this paragraph. If you have a question about this assignment, ask it here:

___________________________________________________________.

Then read this next part as my answer to your question: “Yes.”

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* I suggest using LULU.com only for uniformity sake. Please feel free to use some other service, however the end product should avoid looking hand made or copy machine processed. Lulu provides this reasonably cheap.
Required materials

For every class you may need something to write with and something to write on, as well as previous class’s reading and session notes. Why am I not just saying that you need a notebook, a folder or a sketchbook? Well, I want this “recording and recall” system to be your own, so I don’t want to dictate what form it should take. It could be anything from a series of post-it notes to your laptop, as long as it is a system that you feel comfortable with and that you will be able to use efficiently.

Grading

You will see that in comparison to usual percentage grading or delineated rubrics, I have a very distinct take on what it means to evaluate learning. Given that this class is a manageable size, students will be evaluated individually mainly through conversation. At any point, if you want to know how you are doing in class please set up an appointment to talk about it with me or come and see me during my office hours.

Notes on my grading approach

- All students begin the course receiving full credit for the course.
- Throughout the progression of the course there will be several required tasks that you need to engage in (see course activities). You are expected to engage in all of these tasks fully.
- Consistent completion of these tasks, in accordance with your individual standard of excellence is expected. I have two reasons for putting the responsibility for success in this course in your hands. The first is that I anticipate that you are equally interested in not just “going through the motions” but in actually educating yourself during your time at UIUC. The second is that, although individual tasks will be assigned to you, this course should be considered a collaborative learning space and if one of us fails, in some way, we all do.
- I will not let you achieve anything less then your very best in this course.

So to summarize, do everything you’re supposed to do and do it well and you will receive an A. Do some of it, or do it sub par to what you are capable of and you will fail yourself. Neither failure nor success in this course will come as a surprise to you because you will know along the way exactly how you are doing.

Now, you may ask, “Okay Jorge, but how will I know if I’ve completed everything excellently?” Here’s a clear answer: I will have something that appears to be a grade sheet with all your names on it and all the tasks listed in a grid. You will receive one check for having completed each task successfully. When the time comes to designate “success” or “failure” for this course, a full slate of checks will let me know that you’ve
done everything. There will be no mystery there, if you have unfinished tasks, you will be given the opportunity to complete them. However, given the fact that I too want to go on vacation come this May, all tasks must be completed during the fourteen weeks of the semester in order to receive full credit for the course. In the event that some task is specific to a time period, such as an in-class project, you will be given an alternative, equally useful assignment to be completed outside of class time.

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**Attendance**

You have to be in class. Since this is predominantly a collaborative learning your presence is absolutely essential to this class. Things happen though and I understand that you can’t always be in class. It would be unfair however to determine that you’ve had the same amount of success as your classmates if you’ve missed out on too much of our “together” time. Because of this you are only allowed three absences, after this you will drop a half-letter grade. Every absence after that will incur an additional half letter grade deduction. If you are having a personal or health problem, please meet with me. I will consider your circumstances case by case. Please do not miss class because you are unprepared. Trust me, I’d rather have you in class without your work than not have you in class. Finally, be on time. Tardiness will accumulate into absences and both you and I will be very unhappy.

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**Special Needs**

If a student wishes to develop accommodations for a physical, mental, or learning disability, he/she should meet with the Disability Services at the University of Illinois. They will assist in developing a program to support learning and success. I will be happy to meet with those individuals, in private, who wish to discuss specific accommodations as developed with Disability Services.

For more information: http://www.disability.uiuc.edu/

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**Calendar**

1-18 First Class: The Body Registers
1-25 Dinner at the Lucero’s
2-1 Reading Cluster
Facilitating group___________________ CAPs_________________________

2-8   Reading Cluster______________________________

Facilitating group___________________ CAPs_________________________

2-15  Reading Cluster______________________________

Facilitating group___________________ CAPs_________________________

2-22  Reading Cluster______________________________

Facilitating group___________________ CAPs_________________________

3-1   Reading Cluster______________________________

Facilitating group___________________ CAPs_________________________

3-8   Reading Cluster______________________________

Facilitating group___________________ CAPs_________________________

3-15  Reading Cluster______________________________

Facilitating group___________________ CAPs_________________________

3-22  Spring Break

3-29   Reading Cluster______________________________

Facilitating group___________________ CAPs_________________________

4-5   Reading Cluster______________________________

Facilitating group___________________ CAPs_________________________

4-12   ?

4-19   ? and collage books are due.

4-26   ?

5-3   ?


Reading List

Studio Practice: Where does art take place?


Ecology: the artist as active(ist).


Garoian C. and Gaudelius, Y. (2008). The impossible task as ecological imperative. In
Spectacle pedagogy: Art, politics, and visual culture (pp. 41-61). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.


Identity Practice: who I am and who they think I am and who I can make them think I am.


**Conceptual Art: non aesthetic, non intention, non sense.**


**Relational Aesthetics: be near to me**


**Exhibition: art in the world and in the world of art.**


Camnitzer, L. (2009). Introduction to the symposium “Art as education/ education as art”.

In Weiss, R. (Ed.). *On art, artists, Latin America, and other utopias* (pp. 230-
237) Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.


The Artist as Philosopher: from genius to intellectual (wink-wink).


**Play: but seriously.**


**Partitions and their interpenetration: together apart.**


Appendix B
Hecho en Casa / Home Made
Friday, June 10 to Sunday, June 26, 2011
Cuban Studios, 1930 W. 21st Street, Chicago, IL 60626

A program of events that engage an array of disciplines. Behold that involves open ideas of "cuban the local" (lattigio) (cumulative) and the personal, all while an exhibition open.
This series of events, will take place at Cuban Studios in the Pilsen Neighborhood of Chicago, will incorporate art objects of objects and printed art with prints that each invited artist
finds to his conversation with the idea of "home", introduced by this series of events. These objectives we refer to as the scheduled event forms.

Participating artists:
Alberto Aguilar & Mariluz Aguilar
James Kalin
Jorge Leon
Gerson Avila Luna & Hermes Santana
Owen Tenkar & Teresa Pondeco
Delia de la Garza
Rene Perez
Valeria Zuniga
Sailor Smokey
Jianfei Tian

Program of events

Friday, June 10
6:00 to 11:00
Christopher Santos will host a House (diane) party on the opening night of this month-long series of events. The event is open to the general public.

Saturday, June 11
All day
All invited artists will contribute to a site work design, composed of artist contributed objects that
each artist would like to be in conversation with the idea of "home" introduced by this month-long series of events. Objects will remain on display for the duration of the exhibition and can be viewed whenever an event is occurring at Cuban Studios.

Sun
Alberto Aguilar will open the Cuban Studios for a community pancake breakfast. This pancake breakfast, which is open to the general public, will be accompanied by a showing of cartoon episodes filmed by the artists’ children.

Also at Home
Maribelis Aguilar will host a doll shop object making workshop. Thirteen-year-old Maribelis brings her expertise in creating dolls, a main concern in both Aguilar’s and Aguilar’s work. The workshop will take place from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm. Ginger and white will enhance the event with a slide show of dolls from the Home Made collection. Registration for this event is required. Please contact the artist at ginger@geemayland.com or visit http://www.geemayland.com for more information.

Friday, June 17
9:00 to 11:00
A group of artists will present a studio tour of the artists’ studios. The event will include a slide show of selected works from the Home Made collection. Registration for this event is required. Please contact the artist at ginger@geemayland.com or visit http://www.geemayland.com for more information.

Saturday, June 18
9:00 to 11:00
Jorge Leon will host a talk on two consecutive days where teachers of art and artists will come together to author a book of "home". The results of this project will be published in a book that will be distributed to schools.

Saturday, June 25
9:00 to 11:00
Alberto Aguilar will be in residence at the home of the artist. The event will include a slide show of selected works from the Home Made collection. Registration for this event is required. Please contact the artist at ginger@geemayland.com or visit http://www.geemayland.com for more information.

JUNE 10-24 / 2011
Appendix C


Artists are often taught that as makers of culture and ideas they can look to the formulations and concepts of other artists in order to further their own practices. Whether it’s called appropriation, inspiration, creative response or flat out stealing, artists—regardless of their age, expertise, academic level or even interest in contemporary art—make use of the manifold pluralities in current art discourses to participate in those very conversations that they borrow from. The use of contemporary art in art education continues to have a somewhat modernist lean towards productivity even if the artwork that is being used doesn’t readily qualify as a typical modernist object.

Some artists’ processes—particularly polyglots who work through multiple mediums and strategies—propose that we shift our pedagogical foci away from the production of art objects and language to an artist’s mode of operation and possibly even to an artist’s mere life practices. For example, La Pocha Nostra (LPN) is a San Francisco artists’ collective that is usually categorized as performance-based. Guillermo Gómez-Peña—one of the founders of the group—described cofounder Roberto Sifuentes and himself as, “first and foremost conceptual artists” (Gómez-Peña, Sifuentes & Wolford, 2000, p. 171), explaining later in the interview that “half of the work [we] do is in the civic realm rather than in the art world, but it goes unnoticed …the art world is simply not interested in these other activities” (p. 185). Gómez-Peña points out that these acts of
direct activism—such as affiliating themselves with the Farm Labor Organizing Committee—are perceived by the art world as “parallel activities” (p. 185) to LPN’s “real” work. These “parallel activities” magnify an aspect of LPN’s practice that is difficult to codify for curriculum development because “mere life” is situational, personal, palimpsestic and often times inarticulatable. Sifuentes’ website biography describes him, not as an interdisciplinary performance artist but simply as an “interdisciplinary performance” (La Pocha Nostra, 2010, ¶ 1); that is, Sifuentes’ entire existence falls under this moniker and as such is impossible to replicate either in its form, content, or pedagogy.

Performances where the “otherness” of LPN’s participants is accented via theatrics in order to perform “the multiplicity of mythologies and perceptions of Mexicans and Chicanos in the US” (Sifuentes as quoted in Gómez-Peña et al., 2000, p. 170) is one of the group’s public gestures, which could be seen as curriculizable. However, in tandem with LPN’s less seen “parallel” works of social activism these theatrical works become more nuanced, encouraging creative respondents to—not just watch, mimic, or analyze LPN—but Practice La Pocha Nostra. The observer is invited to blur the public activists’ pedagogical and creative dealings which have more visibility with the private everyday acts of conversation, caring, studying, and planning that usually remain latent in creative social engagement. Presented as an alternative to the aesthetic curriculizing of LPN’s work, Practicing LPN through this purposeful blurring of the public and the private offers creative practitioners the opportunity to create their own powerful mesclas (mixtures).
Jorge R. Lucero/VITA
812 W. Healey St. Champaign, IL 61820/ jlucero@illinois.edu Website: www.jorgelucero.com

Schooling
2011 PhD. The Pennsylvania State University
2008 MS, Art Education, The Pennsylvania State University
2000 BFA with K-12 Certification, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Teaching Experience
2011-present Assistant Professor of Art Education, The University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
2010-2011 Visiting Assistant Professor of Art Education, The University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
2007-2010 Bunton Waller Graduate Fellowship, Teaching Assistantship. The Pennsylvania State University
2008-09 Research Assistant, Penn State University Dr. Stephanie Springgay.
2003 Instructor of painting and drawing, Florence Italy. College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, IL.
2000-2003 Instructor of drawing, Continuing Studies. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago
1998-1999 Director of Galeria Rompecabezas, Melrose Park, IL.

Advisory Boards, Curating, Consulting, and Manuscript Reviewer
2011 Co-curated with Alberto Aguilar Hecho en Casa/Homemade, Cobalt Studio, Chicago, IL.
2011 CPS Senn Arts High School Magnet Program, facilitator and consultant.
2010-present Co-curated 10 to Watch, Figure One Gallery, Champaign, IL.
2009-present Manuscript reviewer, Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy
2009-present Board Member of the not-for-profit performance group Every House Has A Door.
2008 Manuscript reviewer NAEA Advisory newsletter
2007-present Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education Advisory Board Member

Selected Publications

Selected presentations/exhibitions at: C and P Conference, NAEA, AERA, GRAE, IAEA, SAIC, PSU, Harold Washington College, McHenry County College, Reed College, DePaul University, Links Hall, Hyde Park Art Center, PACEedge Performance Festival, Krannert Art Museum, Betty Rymer Gallery, Noyes Cultural Center, Northern Indiana Arts Association, Museum of Contemporary Photography.