

Teacher as conceptual artist



Identifying the overlap between the teacher/artist identities



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



Research Group Arts Education &
the Artist in Residence programme



Amsterdam University of the Arts

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

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

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

TEACHER AS CONCEPTUAL ARTIST



Jorge Lucero is a conceptual artist and educator. He currently serves as Associate Professor and Chair of Art Education at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign. Lucero studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and obtained his master's degree and PhD at Pennsylvania State University.

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Amsterdam University of the Arts
Research Group Arts Education

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

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

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

MODE 2:

MODE 2:
Attain energy via accumulation

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

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

MODE 1:
Consider the institution as material

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

MODE 1:

Relationships can be between people, objects, and spaces.

MODE 4:
Co-construct

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

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

MODE 6:
Present narratives

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

MODE 3:
Use closeness

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

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

MODE 5:
Embrace invisibility

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

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

BY JORGE LUCERO



Make
school
material

Work
with
every-
thing

Be
with
everyone

Test
pliability

Share
resources

Show all
work,
all the
time

Ambi-
tiously
fail

Flux
curricu-
larly

Get
near

Highlight
every
individual

Make
pairs

Touch
freely

Look
twice

Bracket
banality

Co-
construct

Listen at
length

Typeface
your
emails

Lecture
generously

Rupture
normal

Erase
master-
pieces

Forgive
fearlessly

Avoid
teacherly

Plant
things

Build
buffets

Love like
amateurs

Push off
of the
standard

Research
every-
thing

Play
aimlessly

Read
comics
seriously

Write
nonsense

Mush
words

Take
yourself
seriously

Make
yourself a
joke

Draw on
fogged
glass

Run
around

Invent
music

Individu-
alize
uniforms

Trip
through
the field

Carry
selflessly

Cry
every
time

Watch
slowly

Hold
con-
viviality

Walk as
science

Weave as
seeking

Politicize
your
personal

Stack
and
pile

Study
breathing

Breath
while
studying

Contem-
plate
presence

Cross
borders
wide-eyed

Collect
vocabu-
lary

Offer time

Study
ety-
mology

Make lists

Assess
with
mercy

Absurd
your
image

Look up
and
down

Sit
purpose-
fully

Invent
constantly

Split your
lunch

Enjoy
incompre-
hensibility

Be
quiet
more

Owe
only
love

Kindred
your
kindness

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