

Luis Camnitzer
Art and Literacy

e-flux journal #3 — february 2009 Luis Camnitzer
Art and Literacy

01/07

You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass a literacy test.

– George W. Bush, in a speech given in *Townsend, Tennessee, February 21, 2001*

Interestingly, at least in the languages I know, when one talks about alphabetization there is always the mention of reading and writing, in that order. Ideologically speaking, this prioritized order not only reflects the division between production and consumption, but subliminally emphasizes the latter: ignorance is shown more by the inability to read than by the inability to write. Further, this order suggests that alphabetization is more important for the reception of orders than for their emission.

Of course, this theory – that if one wants to be able to write something, one should know how it is written – has some logic to it. It forces one first to read, then to copy what one reads – to understand somebody else's presentation in order to then re-present it. In art terms, however, this is similar to saying that one has to first look at the model in order to then copy it. Now the logical construction becomes much less persuasive. This is not necessarily wrong, insofar as one really wants to copy the model, or the need to copy the model is well grounded. In essence, if there is no proven need, the logical construction ceases to be one – it becomes a dogma disguised as logic.

This theory establishes first that the model deserves to be copied, second that there is a merit in making a reasonably faithful copy, and third that this process is useful to prepare the artist to produce art. This idea is a leftover from the nineteenth century, and its relevance today is highly questionable. An artist then has to ask whether the problems posed today by alphabetization might not be in need of new and more contemporary approaches. Is there an analysis of these problems informed by the attitudes that removed art from the nineteenth century and brought it into the twentieth? In other words, is alphabetization a tool to help presentation or re-presentation? Where is power located? Is it granted to the literate-to-be or to be found in the system that wants him or her to be literate?

One tends to speak of art as a language. In some cases it is even described as a universal language, a kind of Esperanto capable of transcending all national borderlines. As a universal language, stressing *universal*, art serves the interests of colonization and the expansion of an art market. The notion of art as a plain language, however, underlines a notion of it as a form of communication. In this case, power

is not granted to the market, but to those who are communicating.

Educational institutions expect everybody to be able to learn how to read and write. It would follow that, if everybody has the potential to use reading and writing for expression, everybody should also have the potential to be an artist. Yet in art the assumption is different. Everybody may be able to appreciate art, but only a few are expected to produce it – not all readers are writers. Such inconsistent expectations overlook the fact that, just as alphabetization should not aim for Nobel Prizes in literature, art education should not aim for museum retrospectives. Nobel Prizes and retrospectives are more indicative of a kind of triumphal competitiveness than of good education. Put simply, good education exists to develop the ability to express and communicate. This is the importance of the concept of “language” here, the implication being that both art and alphabetization can be linked to nurture each other.

Reading, Writing, and the Rest

At this moment, we are in the precise middle of the decade that the United Nations has designated as the Decade for Alphabetization (alphabetization here used in the sense of

02/07

education for literacy). UNESCO estimates that there are 39 million illiterates in Latin America and the Caribbean, roughly 11% of whom are adults.¹ 16 million of them are in Brazil. These statistics only include people who do not know how to read or write. If we add those who are functionally illiterate – people who have the techniques, but are not able to use them to understand or to develop ideas – these figures grow astronomically. In developing countries, one out of every five people older than 15 is considered illiterate. Among developed countries, nearly 5% of the population of Germany, for example, is functionally illiterate. And among literate students in the US, it is estimated that 75% of those finishing high school do not have the reading skills required for college.

The teaching of reading and writing has been a major part of the schooling mission for over two centuries. It has also been on the minds of countless specialists who ponder gaps in formal education in both expected and unexpected sectors of the public. That everybody should know how to read and write is taken for granted. However, beyond vague truisms regarding its function, there is little discussion about how those abilities are used. And yet the



McGuffey's Eclectic Spelling Book, published in 1879. © Robin Dude on Flickr

problem of illiteracy persists even in countries claiming to have eradicated it.

Art has dealt with illiteracy on amazingly rare occasions, and when it did, it did so mostly of its own accord, keeping within its disciplinary identity and confusions, among them an idea that appreciating art is for everyone while making art is for the few. This means that art's main strengths – speculation, imagination, and its questions of “what if?” – have not really been explored on those occasions. Supposedly art is art and the rest is the rest. Art, however, happens to be the rest, too.

My Imperialism

Forty years ago, I was invited to organize the art department in a US university. I refused on the grounds that art is not really “art,” but a method to acquire and expand knowledge. Consequently, art should shape all academic activities within a university and not be confined to a discipline. I recognize that my position reflected a form of art-imperialism, and this is something I still adhere to. As in all imperialisms, my position was not necessarily based on solid information and I used aggression as a tool for persuasion. Predictably, I was defeated, and shortly after was condemned to solitary confinement in the art department I had so proudly rejected. Yet I am unrepentant: I continue to operate with poorly informed opinions, I continue to be aggressive, and, to be sure, I will continue to be defeated.

My imperialism is based on a generalist view of art in which everything (including the “rest”) can be seen as art. I also believe that the social structures that divide us into producers and consumers – those that ensure that our lives conform to the laws of the market instead of seeking a collective well-being – should be demolished. These were the views we developed as students during the late 1950s while I was in art school in Uruguay. These views took for granted that such a broad definition of art, in which everybody could be a creator, would become a tool for improving society. We were defeated then, and today these beliefs are considered anachronistic and out of place.

Regardless of their feasibility, these perspectives had some importance because they introduced an awareness of the role and distribution of power in matters of art and education that should not be ignored. They clarified claims surrounding the ownership of knowledge, how that ownership is distributed, and who benefits from it. Even if these issues are normally considered to be outside the scope of art, it is on their account that the use of language and the means of engaging illiteracy become interesting to art.

Indoctrinating Subversion

Both art education and alphabetization have in common the dual and often contradictory mission of facilitating individual and collective cultural affirmation and expression on the one hand, and of being necessary tools to cement and expand forms of consumption on the other. Consequently, education is not only an ideologically fractured field, but one in which each of its ideologies assumes its own particular pedagogical approach to apply to all fields of knowledge, overcoming all irresolvable contradictions. When reasonably progressive, such pedagogies assume that one can ensure the stability and smoothness of the existing society while at the same time forming critically questioning, non-submissive, creative individuals. This approach takes for granted that education will create good, accepting citizens who play by the rules, but who will also be subversive individuals attempting to change that society. In a conservative pedagogical approach, the latter part of the mission will simply be ignored.

As it is, the educational system emphasizes good citizenship during the early stages of formation and postpones any potential subversion until the postgraduate level. Speculation and imagination are allowed only after becoming a good citizen. In order for actual subversion to take place, it would first have to address the earlier parts of the educational process. This explains why alphabetization takes place at the beginning of the educational voyage while true art-making is placed at its end, or is indeed postponed until after formal education is over.

The tension that emerges from this built-in stability/instability contradiction creates two main divisions in how education is approached: between “integralism” and “fragmentalism,” on the one hand; and between tutorial education and massive education, on the other. Although the two divisions are not necessarily aligned with each other, in traditional education, fragmentation tends to be coupled with massive education. Here information is reified, classified into disciplines, and simultaneously transmitted to large groups of people with the aim of achieving an efficient conformist stability. Knowledge travels from the outside to the inside. The elements are distinct, and their classification and order are presumed to be good and unchangeable. Power lies in the hands of somebody other than the student.

The second alignment is different. In more progressive education practices, integralism tends to be associated with a tutorial style of instruction in which there is more room for interdisciplinary research, encouragement of

03/07

e-flux journal #3 — february 2009 Luis Camnitzer
Art and Literacy

discovery, and an emphasis on individual processing. While not necessarily seeking either a flexible society or a critical analysis of one's connections to it, there is at the very least this emphasis on individuation. And inasmuch as it includes the possibility of a permanent critique, there is an empowerment of the individual in the form of an encouraged, self-aware perception of the world.

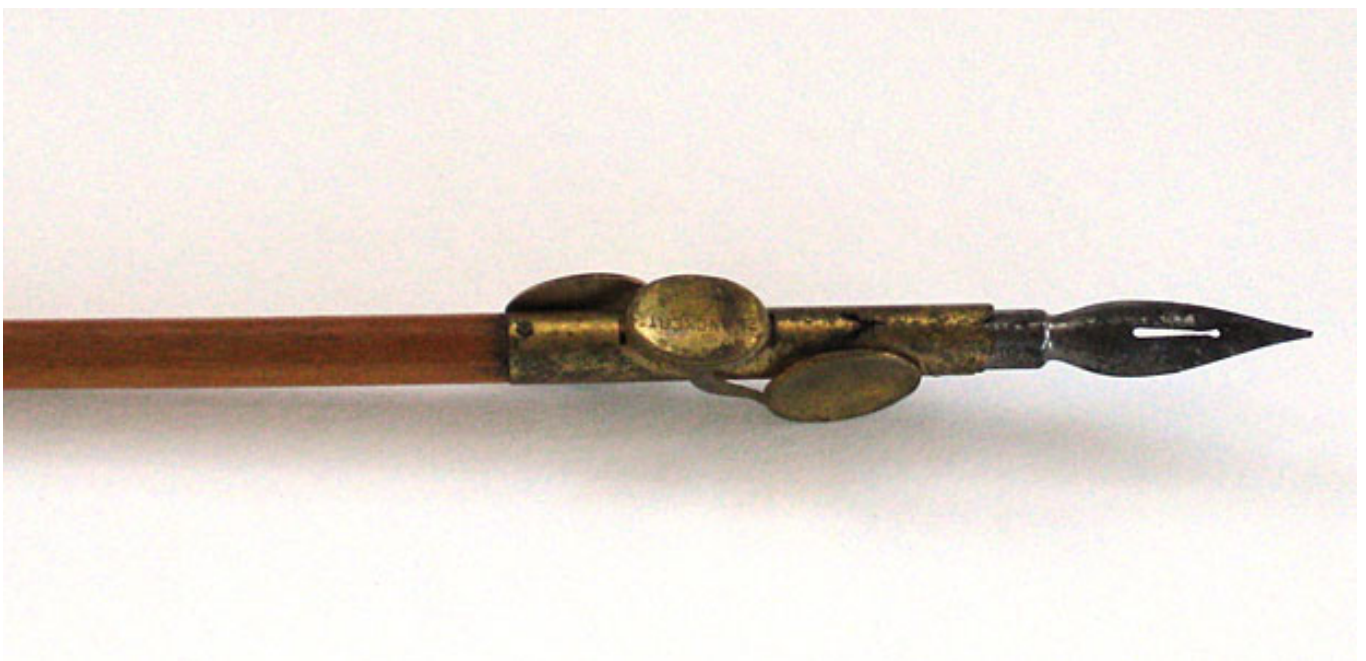
It is this notion of empowerment that creates ideological differences between the two alignments. As soon as empowerment is introduced, the politics around the distribution of power becomes an indissoluble part of the educational process. This can explain why the most paradigmatic pedagogical figures in Latin America sought to develop not only the basic process of alphabetization within the field of education, but also self- and social awareness. Both the Venezuelan Simón Rodríguez (1769–1854) and the Brazilian Paulo Freire (1921–1997) saw education as a form of building a progressive and just social community. In the 1820s, Rodríguez declared that education had to deal “first with things, and second with those who own them.”² In the 1960s, Freire wrote that “before learning how to read words, one should learn how to read the world.”³ Both educators underlined the importance of decoding the social situation prior to decoding the disciplines of reading and writing.

It is not surprising that this form of social decoding is easier to achieve through individual

04/07

exchanges rather than collective ones. Individual tutoring seems to be ideal. When the teacher can focus all his or her energy and attention on one person, it allows for immediate calibration and response to the most minimal signs of incomprehension. Done well, it takes the Socratic method to the level of extreme psychological therapy, making for a tailor-made education for each individual. If the teacher is a good one, this makes for perfection. Seen in terms of efficiency, however, individual tutoring is the least economical strategy. It is no coincidence that having a personal tutor is a symbol of wealth reserved for the upper classes, so it becomes paradoxical to expect this highly elitist mechanism to also be the most appropriate means of achieving a just and classless society.

On the other hand, massive education remains seductive for its apparent economic efficiency as well as its populist appeal. A teacher can form tens or hundreds of individuals with the same investment of time and energy that a tutor makes for one. As far as the empowerment of the individual is concerned, however, massive education has the tendency to disseminate information and indoctrinate rather than to promote investigation and self-consciousness. In other words, striving for efficiency favors cheap output at the expense of qualitative evaluation. Quality becomes assessed within an economic frame of reference. Alarming, this distortion is accepted as the



My mother's pen.

norm. Of course, there are tutors who inform and indoctrinate their students, just as there are teachers educating the masses who are able to raise awareness and empower them. In the first case, however, the tutor is betraying the teaching mission; in the second, the ideals are only reached by overcoming built-in obstacles.

Coding and Decoding How and What

Sixty-five years ago, when I was learning how to write, I was forced to fill pages with the same letter, repeating it over and over again. I had to copy single letters before I was allowed to write words. I was given words before I could express other people's ideas, before I could express my own ideas, before I could even explore what my own ideas might be. It only occurred to me as an adult that, if I know how to write with a pencil, I also know how to draw with that pencil.⁴

For my mother, educated in the Germany of World War I, matters were even worse. She had to use a pen designed specially – not for writing – but for learning how to write. The pen looked as if it had been designed for torture. Oval pieces of sharp tin forced the placement of the fingers into one particular position. If the fingers were not in the required position, they would be hurt. One could speculate that these pens were instrumental in preparing for Nazi Germany's ethos of obedience.

Art education has always been faced with a confusion between art and craft: in teaching **how** to do things, one often neglects the more important question of **what** to do with them. The conventional way of teaching how to write concentrates on readability and spelling, which only addresses the **how** of writing without regard to the **what**. Exemplified by the practice of teaching someone how to write by concentrating on a frozen aesthetic feature such as calligraphy, this approach fails to first identify the need for a message, which would then open an approach to writing that concerns the structure and clarity of what is being written.

In an exaggerated form, the pen synthesizes everything I hated about my education: the fragmentation of knowledge into airtight compartments, the confusion between how-to-do and what-to-do, the development of communication without first establishing the need for it. It was like learning how to cook without first being hungry – without even identifying what hunger is. After all, education is less about being hungry than about awakening appetite to create the need for consumption. In fact, I believe that this is how cooking is taught.

Why can't one first identify and explore the need to communicate in order to then find a proper way of communicating? Languages themselves are generated in this manner, and

this is how they evolve. Words are created to designate things that had hitherto been either unknown or unnamable. Today's spelling errors determine tomorrow's writing. Many of those errors are the simple product of an oral decoding that overlays written coding. Of course, errors should be acknowledged – but they should also be subject to critical evaluation. As a derogatory term, "error" reflects a particular code-centrism typical of our culture. Illiteracy is, after all, only a problem within a literacy-based culture. In general, codes are created by a need to translate a message into signs, and then decoded by a need to decipher the message. Through this coding and decoding, there is a process of feedback in which "improper" or misplaced codings produce evocations that change or enrich the message.

Finding Discovery

When the reason to read and write is primarily to receive and give orders, it is understandable that the need for learning should not be identified by the person to be alphabetized, but by the same power structure that produces those needs. Knowledge becomes predetermined and closed when both definition and identification are performed within this restricted functional field, while a more open field would stimulate questioning and creation. In essence, one cannot educate properly without revealing the power structure within which education takes place. Without an awareness of this structure and the way it distributes power, indoctrination necessarily usurps the place of education.

While this is true for education in general, it becomes more insidious when applied to the teaching of reading and writing. In this case, indoctrination is not necessarily visible in the content, but instead seeps heavily into the process of transmission: if one is taught to repeat like a parrot, it doesn't really matter what is actually being repeated; only the desired automatic, internalized act of repetition will remain. If we only teach to recognize things by their forms without addressing concepts, it won't matter what generates these forms. Only the recognition of the packaging will remain, and worse, the acquisition of knowledge will stop there.

A real education for an artist consists of preparation for a pure research of the unknown. In a strong art education, this starts at the very beginning. But as institutional education in other areas is organized to convey only known information and to perpetuate conventional habits, these are two pedagogies in fundamental conflict. Where, then, should the fight against illiteracy be placed? Should alphabetization be handled as a subject for training or as a tool for

05/07

e-flux journal #3 — february 2009 Luis Camnitzer
Art and Literacy

discovery?

The question may be too schematic. In art, pure discovery leads to amateurism, while pure training leads to empty professionalism – good preparation ultimately seeks a balance between them. The question does not concern which activity should be eliminated, but rather which one should inform the other. Those in favor of training often defend it with the need to supply good scaffolding for the student. Yet if one ultimately hopes that discovery will be the main purpose of a student's life, whether for self-realization or for collective enrichment, it is clear that the student should not just learn to build scaffolds.

We now find ourselves in an age when the amount of available knowledge far exceeds our capabilities for codification. The imbalance is such that we must speculate on whether the concept of restricted alphabetization based on the re-presentation of known things may be an unforgivable anachronism. We may have arrived at a point where we need an education that goes far beyond all this: one that first makes the subject aware of the personal need for literacy and then identifies the coding systems already in use, so that they may be used as a reference; one that proceeds to activate translation processes as a primary tool for entering new codes; one that, from the very beginning, fosters the ability to reorder knowledge, to make unexpected connections that present rather than re-present. In other words, we need a pedagogy that includes speculation, analysis, and subversion of conventions, one that addresses literacy in the same way any good art education addresses art. This means putting literacy into the context of art. By forcing art to focus on these things, in turn, the art empire itself will also be enriched.

×

This essay began as a paper presented at the 1st International Meeting on Education, Art and Functional Illiteracy, which took place in Rio de Janeiro, December 1–3, 2008. The meeting was sponsored by Daros Latin America and co-organized by Eugenio Valdés, Director of Casa Daros in Rio de Janeiro, and myself as Pedagogical Curator of the Iberê Camargo Foundation in Porto Alegre. After the meeting it was decided that we would pursue several objectives within a continuing project we named *Art-phabetization*: a) to study institutional dynamics in existing organizations like the Samba schools to fight illiteracy among their members; b) to blur the borderlines between schools and their neighborhoods and between schoolwork and leisure; c) to study the role of errors in the generation of metaphors and new knowledge; d) to create a literacy or alphabetization laboratory to explore methodologies to be tested in institutional settings; e) to study the possibility of the creation of mobile laboratories; f) to create a blog and an interactive databank of exercises and games that connects the laboratory with literacy teachers.

Luis Camnitzer is a Uruguayan artist who has lived in the USA since 1964, and an emeritus professor of art at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury. He was the Viewing Program Curator for The Drawing Center, New York, from 1999 to 2006. In 2007, he was the pedagogical curator for the 6th Bienal del Mercosur. He is at present the pedagogical curator for the Iberê Camargo Foundation in Porto Alegre. He is the author of *New Art of Cuba* (1994/2004) and *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (2007), both from University of Texas Press.

06/07

e-flux journal #3 — february 2009 Luis Camnitzer
Art and Literacy

1

According to a National Adult Literacy Survey cited in 1996 by The National Right to Read Foundation, 42 million adult Americans cannot read.

According to a 2003 report by the National Institute for Literacy, "The mean prose literacy scores of U.S. adults with primary or no education, ranked 14th out of 18 high-income countries."

2

Simón Rodríguez, *Obras Completas* (Caracas: Ediciones del Congreso de la República, 1988), 1:356.

3

Later, Freire would rephrase this by saying: "To read a word and to learn to write it to then read it are a consequence of learning the writing of reality, of having had the experience of feeling reality and modifying it." Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Alfabetizaci – n: Lectura de la palabra y lectura de la realidad* (Barcelona: Paid – s, 1989), 67.

4

In fact John Gadsby Chapman had already proclaimed that "Anybody who can learn to write can learn to draw" in the first lines of his *The American Drawing-Book* (New York: J.S. Redfield, 1847), as quoted by Arthur D. Efland in his *History of Art Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990).

07/07

e-flux journal #3 — february 2009 Luis Camnitzer
Art and Literacy