



# Art intervention and social reconstruction in education

## Intervención artística y reconstrucción social en la educación

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### ABSTRACT

Social reconstruction through Art Education has constituted an important item on the art education research agenda of the 20th century, in response to the need of the Western world to make education relevant to social problems. The theoretical framework within which social reconstruction philosophy has been developed is that of postmodernism, where the teaching objectives of multicultural education gain a prominent importance.

In parallel, art education teaching approaches are defined, at least in part, by artistic practices and the field of visual creation of each era. In modern era, for instance, the creative self-expression of children and students has emerged as very important for teaching applications and the learning environment. Based on the above hypothesis, two questions arise: a, how do contemporary artistic practices and the ontology of artworks define teaching approaches? and b, in this context, can teaching objectives be connected with the promotion of cultural exchange among groups and emphasise the importance of the philosophy of the periphery (the philosophy that makes one's view more flexible)?

This study attempts to answer the above questions. It focuses on art intervention practice and its teaching implications. We examine the role of these teaching implications in promoting the students' realisation of attitudes and opinions on issues of dominance, power, dependence etc.

### RESUMEN

La reconstrucción social a través de la Educación Artística ha constituido un elemento importante en la agenda de investigación de educación artística en el siglo XX, en respuesta a la necesidad del mundo occidental para hacer la educación pertinente a los problemas sociales. El marco teórico en el que la reconstrucción social se ha desarrollado es el de la posmodernidad, donde los objetivos de la enseñanza de la educación multicultural ganan importancia.

Paralelamente, los enfoques de enseñanza de la educación artística se definen por prácticas artísticas en el campo de la creación visual de cada época. Durante la modernidad, por ejemplo, la autoexpresión creativa de los niños y los estudiantes se convirtió en algo importante. Sobre la base de la hipótesis anterior, surgen dos preguntas: una, ¿cómo las prácticas artísticas contemporáneas y la ontología de obras de arte definen los enfoques de enseñanza? y ¿los objetivos

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de la enseñanza pueden ser conectados con la promoción del intercambio cultural entre grupos y hacer hincapié en la importancia de la periferia?

Este estudio trata de responder a las preguntas anteriores. Se centra en la práctica de la intervención artística y sus implicaciones didácticas. Examinamos el papel de estas implicaciones en la influencia de las actitudes y opiniones de los estudiantes sobre cuestiones de dominación, poder, dependencia, etc.

### KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Art intervention, social reconstruction, learning, disruption, collective production of meaning / Intervención artística, reconstrucción social, aprendizaje, alteración, producción colectiva de sentido

## Introduction

“European culture is in crisis”, a phrase that we hear a lot but not deeply understand. The conditions that have allowed growth to flourish in the past, have now been narrowed down. It is the time for different cultural and ethnic frameworks to emerge and compete with the existing norms and powers of the world. People and social rights are sacrificed on the altar of the provisional preservation of power and authority in Europe. Peripheral countries such as Greece and Portugal seem to collapse like the weakest links of a so-called “unity”. Social correlations among classes are in a constant change. The satisfaction of people’s basic needs is in jeopardy. Multiculturalism and a new philosophy of the periphery emerge from a different point of view. This philosophy refers to the reconsideration of the notion of the “foreign and dangerous”. According to the above, the ideology of Social reconstruction became again a mainstream trend in Education and particularly in Art Education.

On the other hand, Contemporary Art offers new potential for shifts in teaching and learning practices from a different perspective. So, in reference to this, this presentation focuses on the reconsideration of teaching practices and learning potentials through the contemporary art and explores how art intervention can contribute to learning through Art making. Furthermore, it explores how this art learning can be connected with the ideology of social reconstruction.

Art Education has defined the learning potential for students in several directions, pointing out the important role of students’ involvement with the material and its transformation to a work of art. Though their involvement with the material, students enhance their creative ability. Creative action improves drawing

and constructive abilities, as well as research, analytical and interpretative skills. The ontology of art practice and the role of the audience have defined the role of the critical approach to art practice. This theoretical framework led to the separation of the creative action from the speculation on and the critical involvement with art practice. Contemporary Art sets a new context for critical involvement with art practice.

In the context of research that has as main purpose to explore the learning potential of contemporary art many questions arise. Some of them concern the artistic thinking, the conceptual foundation behind the art practice, the role of the audience and more. This presentation focuses on the role of the audience and, furthermore, on the procedure of critical practice in the art classroom. Having as a starting point the role of the audience, teaching and learning are connected with artistic intervention. This is because of the active involvement of the spectators in the art practice. According to the above, we wonder what the role of contemporary Art in teaching and learning is. This is an important question of our days and concerns our practices in the studio / classroom. The important change consists in the role of audience in reference to art practice. There are artistic procedures that consider the construction of the art object as a subordinate purpose. So, a question we have to deal with is what the learning potential is when art intervention is included in art teaching and what the ideological foundation of this type of teaching is.

Through a historical review of Art Education in the 20th century, this paper attempts to prove that a teaching approach like this has to be founded on the ideology of social reconstruction. Furthermore, the learning potential here mainly refers to the collective production of meaning and knowledge and to the



disruption of the established thinking patterns on behalf of the students and teachers. This learning potential could constitute the bridge for a learning gap that is partly created by the necessity to legislate teaching practices that mainly focus on the development of technical skills. This teaching approach practically ignores the foundation of a meaning behind the art practice of students and shows no intention of connecting art practice in the classroom with students' everyday experiences. The ideology of social reconstruction can be an umbrella for these learning objectives and issue-based teaching is the teaching methodology that must be adopted.

### Ideology of social reconstruction

Research in Art Education has passed through several stages during the 20th century. These stages were influenced by the progress in other scientific fields such as psychology. The three main directions of creative self-expression, subject-centered learning and social reconstruction are connected in different ways with social issues (Efland, 1989, 1990; Salla, 2008).

For instance, creative self-expression has been connected with the promotion of a healthy society. This can be achieved through the relaxation of internal tensions when the child is called to express its thoughts and feelings (Lowenfeld, 1987). In parallel, the subject-centered approach has been connected with creativity and the development of creative individuals in times when they were essential for scientific progress, which was necessary for the competitiveness of two world powers during the cold war era. Furthermore, subject-centered programs, as they developed in the frame of Discipline-based Art Education, put an emphasis on introducing children to the intellectual field of art world as it evolved in Western Europe.

Both directions attempted a connection with society, problems and wills. The ideology of social reconstruction, on the other hand, has a closer connection with social matters. It is based on the general belief that education is a power that can contribute to the improvement of the society. Teaching approaches often connect and combine different teaching objectives and procedures.

The ideology of social reconstruction is linked to progressive education (Efland, 1990). Parker and Dewey regarded school as a learning community where emphasis is put on the improvement of the individuals and the involvement of the community itself (Salla, 2008). This ideology was applied in Owatonna program during the '30s, the decade of economic depression in the USA. During the Second World War, this ideology was expressed through the creation of propagandistic posters in the art classroom in order to promote peace

and democracy. Later on, it was expressed in multicultural education. Hidden ideological elements emerged and triggered intense critique, particularly on those that refer to the Eurocentric view of the programs. In our days, social reconstruction was applied to teaching in visual culture, since it was realised that critical abilities are very important in a society that is dominated by a flood of images and information. Finally, Issue-based Art Education is connected with social reconstruction through research and the production of knowledge in social matters.

The Ideology of Social Reconstruction in Education has as a general belief the idea that education is a power that can contribute to the improvement of the society. Some of its supporters believe that education must prepare students to cleverly manage various situations in their lives. It is considered as an opportunity for people to prepare themselves for the continuous changes of the conditions in their lives. In a contemporary framework, the ideology of social reconstruction can be linked to collective production of meaning and knowledge through art learning. This Knowledge may concern both the field of Art and the structure and functioning of the society.

### Art Intervention in Teaching

Contemporary Art practice tends to focus on challenging accepted beliefs and extending the limits of art. Accepted beliefs refer, among others, to the roles of artists, while extending the limits of art refers to the relation between art and science and to new methods that are used in the contemporary art practice. These developments pointed out the need for a new definition and interpretation of art and participants in art. This interpretation goes beyond the notion of the artist or art student as an object maker, highlighting the importance of the procedure in art production and the involvement of the community.

Art intervention and dialogical interrelations consist views of the notion of Art as a procedure (Bourriaud, 2002, 2007; Richardson, 2010). In contrast with traditional types of Art expression, Art Intervention use multisensory, multidimensional and multimedia tools to introduce audience in a strong experience. Some of the main characteristics of Art Intervention are discussed below.

1. Art Intervention is a kind of public art that defines its goals and forms through social exchange and the transformation of behaviors as a result of disruption of the structures of social experiences in public places.
2. It is presented outside mainstream exhibition areas of traditional artistic practices such as museums and galleries.
3. It is based on social collaboration.



4. It does not propose alternative viewpoints; it opens up a new space of intellectual potential.
5. It takes audience as its starting point.
6. These practices are usually separated from common everyday experience.
7. The artist is placed as an important producer of knowledge rather than as the central authority of the meaning.

Commonly used tools are the spontaneous dialogue and the haphazard social collaboration resulting from the intervention in a common public experience. The ontology of art practice refers to challenging established concepts of art as an independent object, an object around which a dialogue emerges, often in the form of a critical and historical analysis. Contemporary approach in art intervention procedure regards social exchange as a basic element of art. The role of art in life is reconsidered as the basis of comprehending the world and ourselves. Bourriaud (2002) describes relational art 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 symbolic space” pp. 14.

In the recent realisation of the ideology of social reconstruction, which refers to Issue-based Art Education, art intervention can become a catalyst of learning in new environments. This is consistent with the learning objectives in Issue-based Art Education, which include the integration of personal concerns with social, political and moral issues by providing answers to contemporary and controversial issues. In parallel, the use of research learning expands to cases of production of knowledge in order to adapt to the continuously changing society.

In such a teaching environment, the context in which critical practice takes place is transformed. Critical practice usually refers to the critical approach to the construction of artworks and the treatment of the materials (Addison & Burgess, 2010). However, when it comes to issue-based art education, critical practice has a wider sense and is related to the analytical and interpretative skills of the students, the context in which the works of art have been created as well as the social criticism that may be implied by the artworks.

Art intervention, on the other hand, adds a whole different dimension to critical practice. Critical practice now expands to the collective production of meaning and focuses on the use for which the art object is intended. Actually, what we have here is some kind of a social exchange. We reach a common point of agreement with the ideology of social reconstruction from a different

point of view. With art intervention critical practice becomes the focus of learning with materials and objects as the starting point.

### Teaching implications and Learning potentials

Precipitating the above, the connection between social reconstruction and art intervention could have several learning potentials. We will focus on three of them: the collective production of meaning, the questioning of issues of power and authority and the disruption of the established thinking patterns in Art learning aiming to realise the importance of art learning in our life.

Let's take for example the case of graffiti which can constitute an art intervention event in teaching. We choose graffiti as an art intervention because it is a technique that is very commonly used by adolescents to express their beliefs and the ideology that gives shape to their lives. Even though it is related to illegalities, graffiti is practically the expression of the youth's subculture and, if it is integrated in art learning, it can actively connect classwork with their everyday experience. In this context, graffiti will be an opportunity for exploring notions of authority and illegality in the context of Art education practice in schools and promote dialogue and interaction. Graffiti as a contemporary form of art intervention can involve the active role of the audience in the creative process and later on. It can also include as a teaching objective the transformation of students' attitude towards issues of social exclusion and stereotypes about delinquency. Students can propose themes for the art intervention, discuss on issues related to political power and community problems, collaborate and develop their critical thinking skills.

Through art intervention, the critical practice can focus on issues of power and authority. We can approach issues of power and authority from the perspective of the role transformation that the artist (or art learner) undergoes, by losing his absolute power and becoming a simple coordinator. Also, we can approach such issues considering the role transformation of the audience who cease to be passive observers and actively participate in the art practice, as well as considering social exchange as an integral part of artworks. Finally, by introducing subculture-related art practices in the educational context, we set up conditions for discussing issues of legality and illegality and how laws are made.

In this context, it is important to emphasise the role of the artist as a producer of knowledge rather than as a central power of meaning. Also, art intervention can be used as a means to connect art learning with community and local problems. The art objects created by the students can be used to stimulate discussions about social issues in the art classroom. At the centre of this learning



process is the notion of art as research. Social problems are analysed through a research process offering to the members of the community a new vision of the social conditions and providing insights for solutions.

Part of the role of the art teacher is to make the students rethink their ideas about the visual arts and this can be realised using art intervention practices. These practices are based on the strong emotional effect they can produce. An intervention through the disruption of social structures aims to change attitudes. School is itself a social structure. Teaching can evoke strong emotions and changes in attitudes when it aims to subvert the taken-for-granted standards and truths. The art teacher can evoke this strong emotional effect in the classroom, either alone or in collaboration with some students. The notions that constitute the focus of this practice may concern the realisation on behalf of the students of the strong role they can play in the production of culture through their practices and beliefs or by admitting their faults and seeing them as a potential for expression and creativity. In order art intervention practices to work, they have to really get the students' attention and include game and mystery.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to add that the focus of contemporary trends in art education is the ideology of social reconstruction. Specifically, issue-based art education and research learning show particular interest in issues of social criticism and critical consciousness. In this context, art intervention has a decisively important role to play. It can offer students the opportunity to reconsider the role of power and authority both in their art practice and in a wider context. And this is actually the link between this teaching approach and the ideology of social reconstruction: questioning authority. Art intervention precipitates the educational event and places the artist/student in the role of a producer of learning conditions rather than in the role of an authority of meaning. In parallel, the teacher who adopts art intervention as a teaching method questions his role as the sole possessor of power and knowledge in the classroom, a fact that reminds us of Freire's approach of "teacher-student and student-teacher" (1972). Furthermore, a curriculum that includes art intervention focuses on the creative process rather than on the final product. Therefore, the students who assume the role of artists learn that when power and authority are transformed into coordinating structures, they can constitute a cause for exploring knowledge and the nature of relationships. 'To intervene' means 'to stand between' and it also implies the transformation of events.

Art education focuses on the person and the interaction with others. The creative ability and the detonation of suppressed creative powers are complemented by meetings, cooperative learning and research. This way, students have the opportunity to participate in the teaching process, interact and develop their communication skills, that are of particular importance in modern society. The personal and fair pleasure through creativity is reconciled with the need to communicate. All this active participation in the classroom helps students to become more active members of the society in their adult life and, why not, reformers of our world. This is a vision articulated by Freire a few decades ago, which is once again relevant in the light of the new changes in the sociopolitical correlations in Western society and globally.

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