

from:

**ch-ch-ch-changes: Artists Talk About Teaching**

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**John Armleder—in a non-descript building in  
Lucerne, Switzerland—a warm June afternoon.**

### How long have you been teaching, and where are you currently teaching?

I started teaching on a permanent basis 10 years ago. I don't remember exactly when it happened ... I started in two academies: l'Ecole des arts de Lausanne, ECAL, the academy of fine arts I think it's called in English, and the HBK in Braunschweig, where technically I have a class under my name, although I changed the name to 'Team' – the *Yellow Pages* project for example is done by John Armleder and Team 404: this stands for a changing team and is made up of the students from the class. We conduct all sorts of projects like that ... so it's been 10 years.

### They sign up for your class?

Exactly. The academies in Germany have classes taught by one artist, professor, or whatever, as opposed to Lausanne where I'm one professor among others and we all teach the same students. The academy decides on the students and we accept them. I have really no idea who is under my supervision, I just see everyone. The class in Braunschweig is supposed to be a painting class so there's a studio space for my class. Theoretically there is also one for me as a professor, though I give this up to students which is something I'm not actually allowed to do ... there's been a lot of discussion about my activities in Braunschweig. One of the students acts as a tutor who is like an assistant and gets a small payment for this. The tutor gathers the class together whenever I come in. We have meetings and we do different projects.

And OK, I started to change things in Braunschweig in the sense that instead of having a class of between eight and 15 students, I would accept anyone who applied to my class. So it grew into a class of 50 students, much more like a forum. And I also pushed a lot of students to take classes with my other colleagues, which until then hadn't been common practice, that students would study with more than one professor. When I started doing this, it was controversial in the school. I had problems with the director because of my way of doing it. The other thing that was controversial was the problem of credits – of grading students and of deciding 'how good the students are'. I don't believe in all of that. Basically, so long as people are there and take part in the projects, I consider them students of my class and they should get the grades and da, da, da, da, da, da. But if you think of what Joseph Beuys did years ago at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, that was exactly the same thing.

### And in Beuys's case didn't the academy have to intervene?

Yes, and they were going to do that in my case too. But of course, it would have been a bizarre replay, and they wouldn't have gone that far because of this. Most of the work in my class is about doing projects, so student's own individual work is just mildly discussed. We normally invite other artists to take part and if students want to show their work, they show it, we talk about it and that's it. I'm not directive in any way. I would never tell a student he'd better do something. He should work with more colours, or larger, or more often.

### When you say the work is project-based, what do you mean by that?

I don't know when the first project was ... It was a series of shows and other events organised by a small group of students in the class. We began by inviting artists from all over the world, to take part in the project by sending us proposals. And then the students built the proposed work of these different artists, as well as their own work, which they also included. The projects were shown in the class, or elsewhere, usually elsewhere. We've just come back from Shanghai, where we did a show.

### The student isn't responding to a brief?

Well, no. We'll discuss collectively how we want to conduct the project, and we'll decide on a theme, or format, which we label in such a way that it can be understood. This will then be dispatched here and there to artists we know. It's usually open-ended, so artists can also contact us and submit a piece that fits this format. There have been very famous artists in our different shows, very established artists, and some people whom we don't even know today who they were. So they're the kind of projects we do. To make it easier to understand; the first project we did was on the invitation of the director I'd had that problem with. He sort of tried to arrange things and said to me 'well, since you're an international artist and know a lot of other international artists, why don't you organise a show with your students?' And that's what we did. Since Braunschweig is near Wolfsburg, where they make Volkswagen cars, we said 'let's do a show about cars'. Volkswagen had a big hall on the ground floor that we could use, so we borrowed 50 cars from different garages, which funnily enough actually lent them to us. Then we sent an

invitation to 50 artists I knew, and they all designed work that would be constructed in or around the cars. The work was to be constructed by the students if the artists weren't available. So the students produced the actual designed artwork for them, while some of those invited came along and produced the work on site. That was the first project. The next project was the *Yellow Pages* project. I can show you a book ...

[Pause while John Armleder gets out a book.]

**I think I read about this ...**

You can have it.

**This is artist's ...**

... submissions. The collection is now in Geneva. It was another project where the class were invited to take part, and it started with an awkward place to show which we didn't know what to do with, and I said 'well, let's use it to launch a project, which will turn out to be a book'. We sent an open invitation to artists to submit a one-page piece in A4, which would be printed on yellow stock like a Yellow Pages directory. The only thing we said was that the page would be produced in black and white, on top of the work of someone else chosen at random. So on each page there are two artist's works on top of each other. We showed it in an actual Kunsthalle, in Basel, and then in MAMCO, in Geneva.

**How did the artists get to work on top of each other's work?**

They didn't. They just submitted their work individually and we printed it. Everything was scanned and then overlapped without a graphic design purpose. It was like chance, just one on top of the other, which is, of course, the reverse of what the Yellow Pages are about. There were 500 or more artists involved, and some very famous, or established, or whatever, and some we don't know who they are. A few were from the old Fluxus days.

**Can you tell me how you think about teaching in relation to your own practice, particularly because of the kind of Fluxus background or tradition you come out of?**

Well, the first thing is that I'm not trained in an art school. I only ever spent six months in an art school in Geneva.

[Tea is served by an assistant. A variety of Chinese teas are offered.]

Since we're just back from China we're experimenting ... I quit the art school in Geneva very quickly. As a matter of fact I originally planned to go to Düsseldorf academy, to Beuys's class, where I had been accepted. I was 18 years old, or something like that. At the time I was engaged in some political activities here in Switzerland. Military service was compulsory and I refused to do it, so I went to prison, which was the normal procedure then. I spent seven months there. And when I came out of prison there was no point in going to art school. As a matter of fact, I had missed the beginning of the class so I never ... I only served time in prison, not in an academy. A few years later we invited Joseph Beuys for a project and I told him how I should have been one of his students, but that I'd spent seven months in his colour-scheme anyhow, so I thought I'd graduated! He sort of looked at me in an awkward way. But anyway ... so, yeah, my background is without academic training, which makes it bizarre, being a professor. I conducted a lot of workshops in Iceland. I just don't know how to teach other than understanding it in terms of working with a group of people and using the – it seems new age – but let's say the *energy* of this group and the different points of view, to understand more about what you're doing yourself. So I'm in exactly the same position as the students when I'm working with them, because I'm discovering things as much as they are. And, as a matter of fact, I take much more out of it, because there are more of them than me.

**But what about the power relations, you're there as a professor, they're there as students, and you're within an academic framework?**

That's conflictual, particularly in Braunschweig at the beginning, because they give a lot of credit, especially in Germany, to the professor. They believe in professors. Here in Lausanne it's a bit different, because for a long time you were teaching basically because you couldn't make a living out of your own art – you *had* to teach. In Germany it was always considered an achievement, and you were called Herr Professor and all those things. I don't believe at all in any kind of power relationship in any situation, and certainly not in art, so I never consider myself as knowing more than students do. I just know it differently, because I have a practice and have shown as an artist. And most of them have not as yet.

**But it's there institutionally, isn't it?**

Yes. It is the pressure and the nonsense from the institution that sort of puts you in that bizarre role.

### **So you have a certain polemical relationship to the institution?**

Well, most typically is when you come to this bizarre moment when you have to give grades. That's always extremely conflictual for me, because my only way of getting out of it is by ignoring it and by systematically giving the students the best grades possible. And that doesn't really work because I'm not the only one giving the grades! Depending on the school there are different problems, but I always run into some kind of problem in those discussions, and it always ends with me being called up by some committee that says, 'by the way, you have to decide your position about the grades', and so on. I do make my point, you know? But this just goes on and on, and nothing comes out of it. Whether you finish your studies with good marks or bad marks doesn't change anything if you're an artist. It maybe gives you a chance to teach or it gives you a chance to maybe get grants, which are all reasons to give good grades to a student – it's just being helpful. But as far as the quality, the engagement of the person as an artist is concerned – good grades, bad grades, no grades, they don't change anything.

### **So can you teach art?**

Well, I don't know if it's teaching, I mean ... I'm involved as much for myself, as I am for them in trying to understand what we're doing. So my involvement with the students is more experimental, much more like a laboratory where people get together to understand a bit more about what they're doing, and what they want to do. Of course, because of my long-time practice I have some kind of knowledge. And because I'm someone who's been interested in art for a long time, I do have that kind of knowledge, not as an art historian, but as an artist, which, in a way, I'm very happy to share. Because if you give something out like that, it will be assessed critically by the people who are listening to you, and given back to you in a different way. So it's reviewing from both sides. And because most of the students are people who are just trying to find out if they want to do art or not, and I'm a person who has been doing art for a long time and takes for granted that's what his life is about, but who still doesn't know why, it's a discussion. An art school is a very privileged place for that. You won't find that again elsewhere, so that's something.

### **Why are you in an art school if you can survive economically without teaching?**

I don't know if I have a good answer, because I don't know if I have a good answer to why I'm doing art. I'm teaching on a permanent basis in both academies. I didn't apply for my own sake. I wouldn't have done it. It was only because people there asked me, people who were friends. In Lausanne, it was a new director who was an old friend. He wanted to arrange the school on different terms, and he was very excited about it and I said 'OK'. It just seemed normal to go along with him, but I had no plans to teach. In Braunschweig it was a Swiss artist who called me one day, Thomas Hüber who was there then, and he said 'oh, by the way, wouldn't you want to come to Braunschweig to present your work?' I didn't understand completely what he said, because it was in German, although I speak German. And I sort of said 'yes, he's a friend, I'll go for it!' When I got there, I discovered that the presentation I was making was for a job, for the post of professor! I only found out when I got there, and then I was accepted. After I had done the general presentation, there was a committee, and they said 'OK, it's very interesting what you said. Now, how do you see your teaching?' And I said 'what teaching?' Then, of course, I explained my position as an artist who worked a lot with other artists – who had created cooperatives and so on. And I said that teaching for me was the same thing. I don't know why they went along with it, but they did. I would never have thought 'oh, I would like to be a professor, I would like to apply to the school'. All the workshops I had done were because other artists thought, 'oh, it would be interesting, fun, or whatever, to have you around'. Economically, for me, it's more of a hindrance than anything else, because it costs me a lot in travel expenses. And when students don't have the money for projects, I usually give part of my wages. So in Braunschweig I don't earn a cent, I'll spend all the money on the projects, to do a book, or something like that, because the school doesn't pay for them. So the economic part doesn't exist at all in my case. On the other hand, I like doing it because I like working with other people. I'm not the kind of artist who believes he has a single mission as a person, and who is going to go home to his studio and do the perfect artwork. That's a position I have as an artist; so it's just quite normal.

I know a lot of artists who would never want to teach because it would be distracting for them. I know a lot of artists who are not 100 per cent engaged in their work and want to

start teaching; all their activity swerves towards academic activity. They can be good professors and not such good artists. This idea that one has to be excellent everywhere is problematic. Art schools have suffered from having a lot of artists teaching who are bitter because their careers went wrong, and their only chance now is because art schools have a kind of credibility in the art community again. It is true that some schools are attractive, in the sense that they try to get famous artists in. So an artist who is not so famous becomes a famous artist *de facto*, so there's this kind of reward.

**Is there something of this reflected in the current interest in teaching and schools, the rise of summer academies, panel discussions about teaching, and so on?**

Yes, and I don't know how much it really makes sense, or how problematic it really is. There are a lot of artists who get together and create their own academies, or pseudo-academies, like Rirkrit Tiravanija, for instance. And there are many others who've also already done that. It's a way to contradict the normal institution and at the same time to recreate it in their own way. Another thing that's always been discussed is how young artists should know a lot about art, especially about what's happening today. So you have a lot of schools where the teaching about art of the twentieth century, or contemporary practice, is fairly intricate, is fairly well addressed. But very often the history of art in a larger sense is completely forgotten. So you have very few people with a specific knowledge about Gothic in our countries, or about the Chinese Ming period. That's a bit bizarre, because we've lost a lot of knowledge, though we've gained a lot of other knowledge. And we think it's important that a young artist when he is quoting something in his practice, knows what he is quoting, but I don't believe in that at all; if someone is using something he finds useful, that is an efficient tool for whatever he is producing, and he has no idea where it comes from, that's good. No one would claim that a young musician who's into sampling music should know exactly what he's sampling. That's what we do in our world, I think.

**Is there a sense that to be an artist today one needs to go to art school, or is OK not to go?**

Of course, of course, because even if you do go it doesn't mean that you know more. You have other tools. The more you learn things, the more you forget things. You forget only because you know. If you don't know, you can't forget. So it's a choice. Look, I have tons

of books. I love reading things about art, but I don't have an academic knowledge about it at all. My reading is totally different to an art historian's. Or even ... I don't know ... Daniel Buren would see all these books in a different way than I do, and use them for something radically different. Or he could be reading only science fiction. So there's no single way. You could just be happy knowing about botanics, or not even knowing, but just looking at flowers. Take paintings of flowers; there are those you like because you can see how organically the flower is made, and there are those you like because of the colours, and you can't say one is better than another. It's about something else. It's the same thing in life in general, and certainly in art.

**When a student enrolls with you, I wonder if they believe they are buying into part of a network?**

You could see it from the other end. In the art world, if someone asks what you've done, and you say 'I went to Goldsmiths', for example, they'll say 'oh well, then, you must be interesting', which makes no sense. But you've always had that in one way or another. Before you would say 'ah, where did he show?' and someone would say 'he showed at Castelli'. Credentials don't exist in art, it's the work you're doing, and how it makes sense at the time you're doing it, or maybe later on. Even that is not decided, because some artists are very important at a certain point and time in history and make no sense whatsoever later on, and vice versa. There are different phases of interest. A lot of credit is given to knowledge, which was not the case before. You actually had the exact opposite; this idea that an artist should be someone who lives just out of feelings, and they could be quite un-knowledgeable, and through their energy, their force, their special character, they would come out with something extraordinary. So it was expected that artists would be a bit crazy and dumb. Now it's the reverse; if an artist doesn't know what he is doing, if he's not capable of quoting, then maybe he's not so intellectually fit to do it. In both cases it's stupid. It doesn't make any kind of sense. And in any case, no one was actually really that dumb or stupid. You could come up with the most outsider kind of person in the art world and find he knows a lot, at least about some things, if not many things. Today if you go and talk with an artist who is supposed to be extremely knowledgeable, maybe he knows some things very well, but then you maybe just move slightly out of that frame and he's lost – he has no knowledge at all. I don't think people have to have universal knowledge but it's true

that everyone has a very specialised field, and if they know a lot then they usually know a lot in very few domains. And even their perception of that knowledge is very restricted.

**You said earlier that you're in exactly the same position as the students when you're working with them, because you're discovering things as much as they do. At what point do you know teaching is doing the kind of thing you want it to do?**

There are so many different positions if someone is teaching. When teaching etching, the teacher knows when he's performing well or not, the student knows what he's talking about, and he will find out if that student follows his instructions and if there's a transmission of knowledge. That's teaching in the traditional sense and that can still work in many domains of the arts, not only in practical making, but maybe also in understanding how to install your work, how to present it, how to discuss it, how to defend your position, and all that. In these cases you can feel that, if you explain your position, it gives students some tools, or some instruments or an asset, they will then develop. But I don't know if I really want to do that. I'm happy to give whatever I can so that someone has it to hand and gives it back to me, and then I know more myself what it's about. So the only time I know when something is happening, is when I'm learning more about it. It's really a mirrored situation. I know that the vast majority of the artists who have been in my classes in Lausanne and Braunschweig, or in other workshops, won't do art later in life. Statistically there must be, globally speaking, tens of thousands of students coming out of art schools every year. There are not ten thousand new artists on the map every year, so you know that in your class, of the people you're working with, there will maybe be one or two out of 20 or 50. It doesn't mean you're only addressing those one or two, it's not only those one or two that count. The others have got to have an experience, which is maybe as valuable, or important for society in general. Because they will have had an experience that will maybe be useful in a bank, or as a cook, or in whatever they will be doing later on.

**Do you know the one or two in your class? Can you tell?**

If I can see when it's happening from the beginning, you mean? Yes and no. Usually you can tell the one that is close, that has everything to be a challenging artist.

**What is it?**

I wouldn't describe it as this or that, but somehow you can see that they're engaged; they can discuss their work, and it means something to them. And they can challenge what they're doing in a critical way by talking about it, or by going towards other people who are doing things that have something to do with what they're doing. You can see very quickly that most of the other people do something else, they don't have that kind of tight relationship with their work. Within that group some will end up doing the kind of art that I have no relationship with, because I'm not teaching them a style or a type of art. I'm not at all in favour of Conceptual art, or Fluxus art, or Constructivist painting, or whatever. I don't think there is any form that I would be able to favour in my discussion with them. If you're in a much more academic subject, if you teach them how to make good landscape painting, then you can see who has the expertise.

**Josef Albers believed that you can't teach art, but you can teach other things; certain skills, ways to develop, to scrutinise objects and the world. The art, however, goes on in the studio, or wherever, and this is the artist's business ...**

It's right. But it's organised according to a world which is probably not working on the same terms today, because it's now much more intricate and complicated. This is a sort of post-Bauhaus definition of an art school. But I suppose the way I do it is not so different from that in the end, because my position would be that students in an art academy should have access to all the studios and workshops to learn different skills or different kinds of recorded knowledge, history of art, or science, or whatever. And the more that is available, the better for everyone. In that sense, art schools in America connected to a universities are very good, because students have access to a lot of information or knowledge. Of course, they then have to sort of pay back in a very academic way, because they have to get credits on all the subjects they're using ... I'm not sure if that's needed, but maybe it is – I don't know.

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