

5. BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN THE ARTS AND ARTS EDUCATION

You grew up in the coastal city of Fortaleza in northeastern Brazil, and you describe your education there as being very restrictive – a matter of following the teacher’s instructions. Was it comparable to what Paolo Freire called “banking education”?

Yes. I studied in private schools, like most middle class kids in Brazil. Unfortunately middle class families in my country typically do not believe in public education or fight for a better public education, preferring to put children in paid schools. Some of these schools are very expensive and also function as an instrument of separation or division between the social classes, reinforcing the serious social inequity that already exists. Middle class families try to put their children in the same schools as those of richer people.

I was in classes that resembled a prison environment, at least this was how I felt at that time with so many disciplinary measures that punished students who would not adapt to the square rules. Banking education persists in our educational system and takes away creativity from students specially because the teacher is considered as the owner of knowledge and the student only receives information that is considered necessary.

We still face challenges to innovation and creativity, despite the many efforts of Ana Mae Barbosa and the Movement of Art Educators (MAE) in the last thirty years. These efforts are visible in the changes made to legislation. Now Art is obligatory throughout the Brazilian educational system, but is not an effective discipline in all schools for two reasons. First of all, because teaching is not seen as an interesting career. This is not only due to low salaries, but also because teachers are not yet perceived, socially, to be important players in the development of the country. This devaluation is even more pronounced in the case of arts teachers. Secondly, beyond the problem of having many public or private school administrators and even school principals with little knowledge of art, visible and invisible violence between students and other students, students and teachers, teachers and other teachers, and between the administration and teachers, still persists.

As a professor who teaches and dialogues with students in Visual Arts Teacher Education, I aim to help them rethink their methodologies and processes of teaching/learning when they are giving classes at school (to 11–18 year old students), and I worry that the system is so standardised that it will make my students drop out of

their teaching career. This is one of the most significant concerns gathered from my experiences and research.

You told me before the interview that the low status of the subject also affected you directly during your youth because you received no formal classes in Art and you were discouraged from studying the subject seriously. You also told me that you left Medical school and joined an Art school behind your family's back. Do you think this was a common experience for young, Brazilian art-oriented students back then?

I cannot generalise, but even today, I often hear my students talking about the difficulties related to choosing a career in the arts. Becoming an artist, an arts teacher or arts professor in Brazil is still not considered to be as good a choice as becoming a doctor of medicine or a lawyer. I think that it is also connected with the colonial, Western and Eurocentric thinking rooted in many actual discourses and socio-cultural practices in the country. In the historical narratives of the arts in Brazil, we can find a strong influence of French, Portuguese, Spanish, English and American discourses in arts education. If you analyse those influences you can connect the Brazilian methodologies and curricula to the areas frequented by theorists coming from those countries.

Many Brazilian researchers are making efforts to discuss and rethink important questions of a postcolonial nature, I am one of them and I choose an emancipatory position. The difficulty of choosing a career related to the arts is now reinforced through an economic factor. Those same countries that influenced Brazilian art education focus too much on the current fashion of creative industries and design, which is nothing more than a return to what was done in England in the late nineteenth century as an answer to the aesthetic development of French manufactured goods.

In order to change this situation we must face the actual crisis. We cannot find an answer to this social, cultural, economic, ecological and human crisis only in design production, thinking and teaching. More than ever, it is now necessary to come back to the essential aspect of our subject. The essential aspect of the arts and arts education is a reinvention of worlds, criticising the world, renovating it. Emancipating through art, creativity, technique, cognition and expression. If some of these aspects are missed in the educational process, our efforts are destined to fail.

You earned a doctorate in Art Education from the University of Porto in Portugal and cite a/r/tography as an international theorisation of art education, research and practice that has been influential on your own academic development. You now teach again in Brazil, at the Universidade Federal do Vale do São Francisco. Where do you locate yourself, theoretically and artistically speaking?

I have participated in many seminars and conferences around the world and I have been working at this university since 2009. I have been trying to rethink

arts education in San Francisco Valley, especially in Juazeiro, Bahia and Petrolina, Pernambuco. I think that teachers or professors play a significant part in the transformation of the place where they live. This is more than a competence or ability; this is an indispensable path for anyone who chooses to work in education. It is not a missionary ideal but an agonistic question that confronts the traditional and modern paradigms without destroying them completely. We must find ways of recycling such paradigms for a post-colonial reality, in a world where there is no more space for so much consumerism and destruction of the ecosystem.

I met Rita Irwin at the 2011 InSEA World Congress in Budapest. At that time I was doing my Master's Degree in Visual Arts with a research topic focused on the methodologies and approaches of Visual Arts teaching used by art teachers in Juazeiro – Bahia and Petrolina – Pernambuco. My readings of Irwin helped me to build my own academic practices. I am now responsible for disciplines that discuss the theories, practices, methodologies, historical narratives and epistemology of Arts Education based in Visual Arts. I also contribute to the students' Teaching Practice: I accompany them and dialogue with them when they go to schools to teach Visual Arts, and I revisit their tensions, difficulties and problems. In all the disciplines I am responsible for, I seek to show students that becoming a teacher is part of a dialectic that bridges theories and practices. I also utilised a/r/tography when I wrote the actual curriculum of the Visual Arts Teacher Education programme at UNIVASF with my colleagues.

What kind of impact has globalisation had on art education in your region?

Globalisation brought two things to my region: one is economic development through wine, fruit industries and so on, and the other is the expansion of monocultures, the presence of Monsanto, which has prioritised the use of pesticides, the tightening of familiar agriculture and transgenic corn and transgenic soya with a huge presence in supermarkets, endangering the health of the population. Our San Francisco river is also bleeding, with industrial sewage and all kinds of untreated waste discarded into it. In a world threatened by new diseases and food shortages, the water crisis for me is one that could lead to a major war.

As for art education, globalisation is evident in the influence of other countries and theories in-between discourses and practices. In 2011, I wrote the first arts curriculum of Juazeiro Bahia and all municipal schools (with students from 5 to 18 years of age) now follow it as a parameter, not as a rule. My goal was to unite different methodologies and theories and bring together many aspects of local, regional and global importance. This curriculum also responds to the needs of arts teachers in the city. We discussed the main problems and difficulties of those teachers during meetings and the need for a greater emphasis on artistic education. One of the results of this development is the holistic vision that combines multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary aspects of the Arts, also known as MITA.

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I understand that globalisation and the internationalisation of universities is inevitable, but they cannot be completely blind to local and regional questions. Some of the questions I ask could be generalised globally, while others can't. We all live in a world in crisis, but we cannot generalise the production of art and research about it, or even what it means to be human. There is a song in Brazil, *Comida* (Food) by Titãs, that says: "We do not want only food, we want food, art and entertainment". This reminds me of people like Kandinsky and Herbert Read, who thought of art not only as a discipline but also as a basic human necessity.



Figure 13. Flávia Pedrosa Vasconcelos, *The eyes*, 2014, drawing

**What role does art practice play in your life and in the courses you teach?
Do you believe that every art educator should also be a practitioner?**

Arts practice for me forms the basis for reviewing things and the context where I live. When I produce drawings, paintings and performances, I am especially interested in interpreting the context, my feelings, mental images and an intersubjectivity related to the creative process.

At the end of my graduation in Fine Arts in 2008, I developed a performance called *Acordares* (Wake up). This consisted of the registration of a performative action in which I slept near the front door of Fortaleza's museums, questioning the lack of opportunities that these spaces give to local artists. This work led to another photo-performance which was selected for "57th Salão de Abril", a very

relevant Art exhibition at Ceará State. This was one of the first performances held in relation to the context of the institution UNIVASF. The performance challenged the categorisation of students on the basis of test scores and raised awareness about the importance of their general education.

Yet another performance was presented in an international Art education congress and was a reflection about drawing and the necessity of representation, referring to the myth of Dibutades about the origin of drawing told by Pliny the Elder.

The creation of an artwork can be poetic and can also come from an insight. When a work is a poetic form of expression, the creative process is developed aesthetically, and its relevance resides in the different expressive qualities found in the media. Insight depends on practice; the more I draw, paint and make performances, the more my artworks grow in the production of meanings. I am drawn to contemporary art but most of my work is not only conceptual. For me art has to defend points of view, and a meaningful artwork should demonstrate expressiveness, creativity, cognition and technique. If one of those things is missing, the artwork will not have the aesthetic, political, and reflexive qualities it should have.

I have some difficulties with technical and idealised drawing. Through reflections that formed part of my PhD research, I discovered that those difficulties could be a result of my education and they should be faced. Everybody can learn the arts, but not everybody can become an artist or a teacher or a researcher. Artistry is a new term that is very fashionable in Britain, and one comes across it in many Canadian studies. The term begins with Elliot Eisner's lectures, when he referred to education as an instrument that promotes teaching and learning, a search for excellence, and the stimulation of artistic processes. This thought has been perverted in actual educational policies and I have come across researches that shows that some public schools are killing the idea of the arts as an important and specific form of knowledge by using the arts as a methodological tool to teach other contents in disciplines that are considered more important such as mathematics or languages, which has led to many arts teachers finding themselves unemployed.

I think that this is a neoliberal and consumerist idea that aims to eradicate the arts from curricula in schools around the world. Artistry for me is a search for excellence in competences and abilities. It can also be found in teaching (teachistry) and in research (researchistry), and it comes with time, patience and an understanding of the slowness of the process of becoming. Employing quantitative methods used in the evaluation of science as methods for evaluating art is problematic. Our scientific governmental agencies persist in North American methods of evaluation that put quantity over quality. The emphasis on productivity is killing the arts.

I utilise some artistic practices to question my students and deterritorialise the functions of teacher and student and we reread theories through practices. I'm influenced by Rancière's notion of the "ignorant master", Paulo Freire's writings and now Gert Biesta and other authors who connect post-structuralist and post-colonialist thinking.

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For those reasons, practice makes art education stronger and brings out the potential of the teacher, the professor, the artist and the researcher. I consider myself as a professor/artist/researcher because I am always thinking and living through those identities, and I take the aspect of continuous becoming into consideration. Everyone should be a practitioner in any career, by practising theory, reviewing theories and true innovation comes into being in this way.



Figure 14. Flávia Pedrosa Vasconcelos, Designações a Miró ou porque eu preciso desenhar, 2014, drawing

Talk to me a little about your own research. In what ways does it create bridges with realities out there, for example in public schools?

During the last five years I have reflected about my experiences in Visual Arts teacher education, in which I focused on creating bridges of knowledge. I interpret knowledge as a divergent unity of a set of theories, practices and in-between competences and abilities that develop one's multiplicity. So the analysis of knowledge in any area also means the analysis of the different bridges that it can unite or divide. I am interested in the tensions and possibilities of curriculum development, methodologies, teaching/learning processes, aesthetic experience, intersubjectivity, expression, cognition, creativity, theories and practices in the arts. Bridging in my research is an attempt to present the issues that knowledge

and its production offer in visual arts teacher education as part of an educational process.

A project I worked on with my research group MITA involved teachers from public schools, visual arts education students and university staff as well as the carpenter and cleaning people. The focus of the project was to recycle forgotten wood in order to produce sustainable furniture. This was how I got some of the furniture for the laboratory I created in the course (Visual Arts Didactic Production Laboratory – LAPDAVIS).

My concern with public schools is not only related to the effectiveness and quality of arts classes, but to the appreciation of the teacher in this area. It makes no sense for me to theorise teaching practice or artistic practice in a university if I do not stimulate change. In my job, it is important to bridge university with schools, by helping to implement policies for the enhancement of public arts education, free and quality-driven for all in the region in which I work.



Figure 15. Flávia Pedrosa Vasconcelos, Lightning, 2014, drawing

Many academics in Europe, especially those who work in the arts, complain about the amount of bureaucracy and administrative work that stifles their creative output as well as their ability to be more experimental in the pedagogical methods they employ during their classes. Do you feel that art education runs the risk of becoming too formal and outcome-oriented in the context you work in?

I feel that it is also a global problem. The suffocation of academic work through bureaucracy, administrative work and the productivity obligation are factors that increase stress and affect the person's well-being in the exercise of his or her profession. A university is not a company. The production of thought and review of knowledge is not like the production of an industrialised product. And academics are humans, not machines. This reminds me of Chaplin's movie *Modern Times*.

Judging from the conversations I have with other academics in universities in different regions of Brazil, I think that this reality is evident in the bigger and older universities and affects academics who work in post-graduate programmes which are funded and supported by government scientific agencies. The high standards of evaluation increase stress about productivity and make those professors spend hours or days every month updating their curriculum, completing paperwork and organising proposals for new forms of financing.

As an academic I received financial support from government agencies for my Master's degree and later on too. Many of these funds were connected to the development of training in distance learning courses, the administration of a distance course in Visual Arts Teaching and support for developing my thesis in Portugal and debating it throughout Europe and Australia. This support was always connected to the pressure of productivity standards but nothing that gave me too much anxiety or interrupted any artistic processes which I was developing in my research.

UNIVASF is a young, Brazilian university and is the only federal university created in recent decades with a regional development mission. Its area of influence and action is spread throughout the north-eastern, semi-arid region. From my experiences in this university, internationalisation and globalisation are concerns but do not restrict it too much.

Actually I am obliged to give at least eight hours of classes per week and to be involved in research and artistic work at least every two years, which allows me to progress in my academic career within this institution. In order to do this, my artwork, research (projects, publications, participation in seminars, and so on) and education (courses and disciplines I teach) are evaluated every two years by a referee who belongs to a Progression Committee of Professors. In comparison with other academics and other arts departments in Brazil, I am satisfied with the time I have to research, to supervise students and also to do bureaucratic work. I think that we risk making arts education too formal and outcome-oriented in my working context if the educational policies in Brazil continue progressing in a productivist agenda. However, I have a great hope in the potential of arts education to review critically indispensable issues in Brazil and I will make my efforts to promote an emancipatory dialogue to find solutions together with my colleagues, especially in Latin America. An example of these efforts was the recent inclusion of Bahia as the first northern state in Brazil participating in the Latin American Arts Teachers Education Research Network (LAIFOPA) in Santiago, Chile.