The Church of Ethical Cynicism

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN SAM DURANT AND LUIS CAMNITZER

“The museum is a school: the artist learns to communicate, the audience learns to make connections”: Luis Camnitzer writes this in big letters on the facade of the Museo del Barrio in New York, making a pact with visitors. What follows is an impassioned reflection on the relationship between art and pedagogy, on the part of Camnitzer and Sam Durant, from which a neo-Enlightenment conception of the role of art and artists emerges: art as a social service capable of reacquainting people with freedom and critical thought.

Sam Durant: You have installed a text work on the exterior of the various institutions hosting your survey show from the Daros Collection which reads, “The Museum is a School: The Artist Learns to Communicate, the Public Learns to Make Connections.” This declarative statement, which some might call didactic, exemplifies your idea that art and pedagogy are inseparable. Could you comment on this?

Luis Camnitzer: Ricordo che, durante la discussione per l’allestimento di una mostra, il direttore di un museo del quale ero consulente pedagogico mi disse: “Questo è un museo, non una scuola”. Quindi gli ho mandato questo testo che avevo inserito con Photoshop sulla facciata dell’edificio. Poi mi resi conto che in realtà era un’idea interessante e ho deciso di farne una vera installazione. Ho fatto comporre il testo dalla tipografia del museo e ho chiesto di ricavarne cartoline “ufficiali” da mettere in vendita nel suo bookshop. L’idea è portare questa istituzione a stipulare una sorta di contratto con il pubblico, in modo da responsabilizzarla. In realtà il mio ruolo è solo quello di manipolare della situazione, non di autore in senso proprio. Comunque, il fatto è che considero l’arte come forma di servizio sociale che dovrebbe...
Luis Camnitzer: During discussions about the installation of an exhibition with the director of a museum for which I was advising on pedagogical stuff, he told me: “This is a museum, not a school.” So I photoshopped this text on the façade of the building and sent it to him. Then I decided that it actually was a good piece and decided to install for real. I had it done in the institution’s typography and asked to have “official” postcards made and available in the museum shop. The idea is to lead the institution into a kind of a contract with the public, so that they become accountable. My role is really only that of manipulating the situation, not one of big authorship. The thing though is that I consider art as a form of social service that should help the empowerment of the people rather than the expansion of a consumer base. From that point of view art has a pedagogical nature. The artist’s role is not that of a condescending didactician, but one of an agent that helps liberation. I think that this is what you are trying, in more subtle ways, with your pieces about the Italian anarchists. They shared the same ideology I’m describing and your pieces follow that in how you approach the topic, including in the purposeful lack of finish of the portraits.

SD: You are referring to the marble busts of Italian anarchists, which are left unfinished, and the reproductions of crates and boxes that explosives are shipped in. Some of these items have short quotes carved into them, for instance, from Carlo Pisacane: “Ideas spring from deeds and not the other way around.” And, from Carlo Cafiero: “Our action must be permanent rebellion, by word, by writing, by dagger, by gun, by dynamite, sometimes by ballot when it is a case of voting for an ineligible candidate. We are consistent, and we shall use every weapon which can be used for rebellion. Everything is right for us which is not legal.” It’s ironic that these quotes, lettered in stone, can be described as “subtle” in comparison. I agree with the characterization though. The Museum is a School offers a more direct challenge than do the marble sculptures. Staying with the subject of the school, I want to ask you about art schools and more specifically about the recent phenomena of “independent” or artist run schools. While there are significant differences between them I am thinking about one that started several years ago in Los Angeles and seems emblematic of the genre. The founders sent me a prospectus while they were getting it organized; I thought it was an elaborate parody, not realizing until a year later that it was true. It seemed to me that what they were offering was a fast track course in the business of being an artist, how to find a market niche for your product along with the appropriate theoretical framework for it and, most importantly, how to network to get your product in front of the right peo-

aiutare a trasferire potere alla gente piuttosto che ampliare la base dei consumatori. Da questo punto di vista l’arte ha una natura pedagogica. Il ruolo dell’artista non è quello di un maestro accondiscendente ma di un agente che facilita la liberazione. Credo sia ciò che stai cercan-
ple. They were making obvious what usually gets covered over by accredited art schools and university programs. At the same time these precarious independent schools, even the ones with counter-hegemonic ambitions, seem to answer the neo-liberal call so perfectly. I wonder what you think of this?

LC: I think that the true mission of art as an agent for social and cultural development has been lost long time ago. Instead it has been downgraded to be just one other form of production that has to insert itself in the market. Unfortunately this approach is spreading around the world and totally messing up the educational system. With all due respect to the quality of the Whitney's Independent Study Program, which a long time ago I wrote about, equating it to the approach of other corporations. Many corporations prefer that their employees not be trained in universities, but on their corporate premises. This ensures that they know the inside of the trade and the actual needs of the corporation without the lag that the academic setting inevitably has. So, that the museums and auction houses, or even groups of artists train artists seems a logical conclusion of the system. The main problem, however, is not their existence but their approach. Without any warning they stop focusing on art and teach how to function as an artist. I think that any challenge here is useful. My The Museum is a School is a very direct and explicit challenge. Your anarchist homage is subtler because it comes disguised in a more clever way to approach the questions of education and the arts. Without the language of the market, you can comment on the system without being an active participant. I think that the true mission of art is to teach how to be human and to resist the forces that try to control us. Without this, art becomes just another commodity and the idea of a museum as a place for education is lost. It is a sad state of affairs and it seems that we are heading towards a world where art is only a form of entertainment and money is everything. I don't know if we can change this but I think it is important to keep questioning the system and the way it operates. It is only through this kind of questioning that we can hope to find a way out of this situation. I hope that the discussions I have had with you and others will help to shift the focus towards a more ethical and humanistic approach to art and education.
expected packaging. But either piece challenges the way we think and try to redirect ideologies. I try to rescue the little that is left in the pedagogical potential of the museum institution. You are trying to underline the pedagogical mission of an ideology that, for the survival of profiteering, has been typecast as a form of terrorist strategy. Ultimately the problem is in the artificial separation of art from education. That allowed art to be seen as an isolated discipline and from there as an accumulation of crafts that, well-handled and in the setting of appropriate training, lead to economic success. I don’t think we’ll ever be able to undo that, but we at least should spread the warning and have people develop a more cynical view about these things rather than taking them for granted. For a long time I have considered starting a Church of Ethical Cynicism, with me as its Spiritual Advisor. The idea is to use corruption without being corrupted. Would you join?

**SD:** I’m afraid that I am already one of your parishioners! Could you talk a bit about the role humor plays in your work and thought?

**LC:** Well, don’t rush it with the membership; I haven’t determined the fees yet. In terms of humor, I think it is part of our organizing reality and coping with it, and therefore it also should be a part of art. Or at least, we should have the right to use it as part of it. Humor is a good for communication too. I don’t think that it should be the main content (I’m not over enthusiastic about Richard Prince), but it should be considered as something useful. In the tautologists of my generation, the use of pure linguistic tautology led to a kind of autistic art. The pieces finished enclosed in themselves and left the audience outside. By including humor one could leave an exit door open and let people continue on their own without the help of the artists. Anyway, I think more interesting is the topic of education. How do you actually see your work in the context of education, in itself and in relation to your teaching?

**SD:** I had the great fortune of being high school age in the mid-1970s while living in the suburbs of Boston. I enjoyed the brief period of progressive educational policy in the public schools and being in the midst of the federally mandated desegregation of the Boston school system. Education was fought over during this time, it was understood to be political with very concrete stakes in the world, and those of us who were students couldn’t help but become involved. This moment of liberatory educational possibility was quickly extinguished with Reagan’s election in 1980, never to be seen again. These experiences shaped the kind of artist and teacher these costs in order to prเสร์p for scontate. È da un pezzo che penso di fondare una Chiesa del Cinismo Etico della quale sarei Consigliere Spirituale. L’idea è usare la corruzione senza essere corrotti. Pensi di aderire?

**SD:** Temo di essere già uno dei tuoi parrocchiani! Cosa mi dici del ruolo dell’umorismo nel tuo lavoro e nel tuo pensiero?

**LC:** Beh, aspetta a dichiararti parrocchiano. Non ho ancora fissato la quota di iscrizione. Riguardo all’umorismo, penso sia parte del nostro modo di organizzare e affrontare la realtà, e quindi appaia diritto anche all’arte. O quanto meno, abbiamo il diritto di usarlo nell’arte. L’umorismo è importante anche nella comunicazione. Non penso debba essere il contenuto principale (non sono così entusiasta di Richard Prince), ma va considerato come qualcosa di utile. Nei fautori della tautologia della mia generazione l’uso della pura tautologia linguistica ha portato a una sorta di arte autistica. Le opere erano talmente chiuse in se stesse da escludere il pubblico. Usare l’umorismo lascia una porta aperta al pubblico che, una volta uscito, può continuare per conto proprio senza l’aiuto degli artisti. A ogni modo, secondo me il tema dell’istruzione è più interessante. Come vedi il tuo lavoro nel contesto dell’istruzione, in quanto tale e in rapporto alla tua attività di docente?
er I have become. I really relate to the second line of The Museum is a School, “The Artist Learns to Communicate.” It took me many years to realize that art is communication and that the central question is fairly simple – just what is it that your work communicates? The phrasing of your text is so subtle and succinct: you don’t say, “The Artist Teaches” or even “The Artist Communicates,” you position the artist as also learning, revealing that in “school” as well as life we are all learning. I humbly try to remember this in both my teaching and my artwork. I tried for many years to separate teaching from being an artist – like I had two selves, one for each job. The only real difference I see now is that one job pays and the other one does not. I teach at an elite art college and I wonder about the possibility for change coming out of such a place, is it already too late by the time young artists get there? Can the contemporary art world become more about culture as a liberating possibility or pedagogical practice and less about producing for the marketplace?

LC: For myself, I solved that dichotomy problem by merging pedagogy with art and vice-versa. I see the traditional disciplines to which the words refer as different media for the same content. The merger of course, is easier on the conceptual level than on the crafts level. When we deal with ideas – with their generation and their communication – we actually are on a common ground for both. From there we can spin off into more detailed honing to ensure communication. In the classroom, it is to engage the students into making connections of their own and accessing information to refine their focus, again, on the making of connections and sharing that power with the public. The shift from market to culture (if we want a culture that is not represented by the market) is to be clear about that we work in a non-material sphere that uses material presence only to document and not as an end in itself. It’s like those little dehydrated toys that expand enormously once they are put in water. The water here is the imagination of the public. Meanwhile, imprisoning those connection in objects is a conservative activity because it breaks down borderlines and opens space for new ones. Meanwhile, imprisoning those connection in objects is a conservative activity, because it sets down borderlines, even if they are new. All this makes me feel that enlightened education is more effective than enlightened art. I don’t know how much importance you place on the “making” of your art. I’m not suggesting to stop making objects, just to place them in the right context. Communication, as you say, is very important. Now comes the question what are we communicating? For whom? With what purpose? When you ask a teacher, generally you get more precise answers than when you ask an artist. But then the time I would disagree with what the teacher tells me (partly because it implies that he or she accepts the role of being a “teacher” without questioning the allocation of power that the title implies). How do you place yourself in this? I know you are not an authoritarian educator and nor are you a declarative artist. But how do you merge all this into one activity without having to deal with multiple personalities?

SD: Fusing the artist-self and the teacher-self into one identity that is engaged in a single practice of pedagogy is not an idea widely embraced by the institutions of the contemporary art world, it could even be revolutionary! For me it is a slow, ongoing process of bringing together the two identities. At the risk of sounding melodramatic our conversation right now is helping me quite a lot to think through and clarify what it means to do this – I am learning as we work. Looking at the teaching arena I can see that this transition is made both easier and harder by the program I work in. On the surface it seems easy, we are encouraged to see ourselves as working artists who also teach, our identities as educators are strongly connected to the interests we have in our art practice. Upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the teaching is really secondary, a slave to the art practice’s master. Art world discourse more transparently militates against art-do that nella “scuola” così come nella vita ci troviamo tutti a imparare. Io cerco umilmente di ricordarmelo quando incontro l’esigenza che quando faccio arte. Per molti anni, ho cercato di separare l’insegnamento dall’attività artistica – come se avessi due identità, una per ogni lavoro. L’unica differenza vera che vedo adesso è che uno dei due mi dà un reddito e l’altro no. Insegno in una scuola d’arte prestigiosa e mi chiedo se da un lato come quello possa venire un cambiamento, da un altro una possibilità per i giovani artisti? È ancora possibile che il mondo dell’arte contemporanea diventi più una forma di cultura intesa come possibilità di liberazione o come pratica pedagogica e meno una forma di produzione per il mercato?

LC: Da parte mia, ho risolto questa dicotomia fondendo la pedagogia con l’arte e viceversa. Vedo tali discipline tradizionali come media differenti finalizzati alla medesima “missione”. Naturalmente, questa fusione è più semplice sul piano concettuale che su quello del fare. Quando parliamo di idee – della loro origine e della loro comunicazione – occupiamo quello che è un terreno comune a entrambe le discipline. Da li possiamo articolare elaborazioni più sofisticate e adeguate alla comunicazione. In ambito educativo, significa spingere gli studenti a stabilire collegamenti per conto loro e ad accedere alle informazioni necessarie a compiere una ricerca più approfondita. In ambito artistico significa, di nuovo, stabilire collegamenti e condividere questa capacità con il pubblico. Il passaggio dal mercato alla cultura (se vogliamo una cultura che non sia rappresentata dal mercato) significa avere chiaro in mente che operiamo in una sfera non materiale che usa la presenza materiale solo per documentarla e non come fine a se stessa. Come quando mettiamo giocattoli disassemblati nell’acqua. L’acqua in questo caso è l’immaginazione del pubblico. Ciò che non capiamo – sia gli artisti che i non artisti – è che compiere collegamenti insaputa è un’attività sovversiva, perché annulla alcuni confini e crea spazio per trascinarli di nuovo. Ma imprigionare quei collegamenti negli oggetti è un’attività di tipo conservatore, perché impone definitivamente dei confini, anche se di tipo nuovo. Tutto ciò mi fa pensare che l’educazione illuminata sia più potente dell’arte illuminata. Non so quanti importanza tu attribuisca al “fare” arte. Non sto dicendo che dobbiamo smettere di produrre oggetti, solo che dovremmo collocarli nel contesto giusto. La comunicazione, come dici tu, è molto importante. Ora si pone la questione: cosa comunichiamo? A chi? Con quale obiettivo? Se lo chiedi a un docente, in genere ottieni risposte più precise di quelle che ti può dare un artista, anche se il più delle volte sarei in disaccordo con il docente (in parte perché si presuppone che lui o lei accetti il ruolo di “docente” senza mettere in discussione il concreto di potere che quel titolo implica). Come ti poni rispetto a questo? Se non che sei nè un educatore autoritario, nè un artista da proclamare. Ma come compioni tutto questo in un’attività unica senza dover gestire personalità multiple?

ists being involved in education, let alone the idea that an artist might produce pedagogy rather than art objects. In terms of my views about artworks, I think I share your opinion that the object itself is of secondary importance, it is simply a vehicle through which we communicate ideas. I only care about the making of the work and its formal manifestation in the sense that these contribute to the work’s meaning. The galleries that I work with will probably be dismayed to read this, but to their credit they have stuck with me and I am thankful for that! I am in the midst of working on a re-installation of the Artists’ Tower of Protest, which was originally done in 1966 in Los Angeles to protest the war in Vietnam and US imperialism. A couple of years ago it was redone for the Whitney Biennial and I remember feeling somewhat cynical about it until I talked to Hans Haacke. He brought up the fact that it was the first time that a major New York museum was publicly taking an anti-war stance. It stopped me cold because he was right, while it was very different from the original version it was nonetheless a significant accomplishment. I am just remembering a work of yours that compares two “earthworks,” both done in 1970, and might be understood as a comment on the relations between art and war.

LC: I hadn’t fully registered that Whitney thing either. Hans is right, in the context of a very reactionary environment that Whitney action was remarkable and should be extolled. I think it’s great you are doing that. I’m not totally sure (until I see it) if that project can become art. I think the Smithson piece is called April 1970 (both earthworks were done in the same month and year, which was creepy). The piece was part of an “Agent Orange” series of forty-five photo-etchings I made in 1984. Funny, I used the NY Times clipping side by side with the Smithson piece in my classes to show their shared ideology fifteen years before I made my own piece. Coming back to the Whitney Tower, maybe for generational reasons I still require that art — whatever shape it takes — have some mystery. Not in the literal obscurantist sense, but in terms of revealing something unknown. A lot of stuff today is so much reduced to one-liners or to literal social work, that I miss that aspect. In 1966 I was able to invite Buckminster Fuller to the college where I was teaching at the time. He gave one of his famous endless lectures and, at some point, drew two triangles starting a pyramid and commented how, without doing anything, the third triangle just appeared on its own. It’s that kind of magic I’m referring to. I think we have to keep that in mind, it helps unite art and education under one umbrella. I’m retired, but you are still there!