

Interview between Dan Paz and Tania Bruguera

So I thought it would be interesting for us to have a conversation given the nature of our relationship.¹ I also thought in learning how to become a better teacher...

I think some of our first major experiences within education are with our teachers. I thought a conversation on teaching would be interesting considering the direction my work is moving. I thought an *interview* felt too over-determined, so I am calling it a conversation.

I was thinking we could talk about *Immigrant Movement International* and the relationship of the participants, how you might distinguish between that dynamic and working with students. Are there any successes and failures within those relationships? What would be your teaching philosophy?

I also think it's interesting that your not necessarily affiliated with any institution yet you're creating an institution of your own practice. Immigrant Movement is seeking to do things that fit within certain institutional structures to operate against them. Then that leads me to think about your teaching philosophy. So, if you were to have a teaching philosophy, what would that be and is that separate from your thinking as an artist?

To start your first comment; education begins before school, as soon as you are aware of the others. Education is the moment when you know yourself as a social being, of the inescapable situation of your role to come as part of society. We can almost say that education is a kind of training to forget this as a fatalism. It is like coaching you to find a sense for your life -which education makes clear- can only happen in a collective setting. After that we consciously become endless students and teachers, we learn to learn all the time. We learn to reject all that do not enter in this process; that being an alienated crazy person, a homeless that we assume had fail so (s)he has nothing to teach us, those in corporative life that do not want us 'to know', an immigrant that we wrongly think has nothing to tell us about ourselves, and so on with anyone we consider a social failure.

Immigrants are a big part of this dynamic, as soon as an immigrant touches foreign land with the intention to stay for a short time or permanently, they are automatically considered students by the rest of us. The problem with this is that we do not consider immigrants people we can learn from. There is a paradox where you can go to another country to see an expert but the immigrant that is working next to you, who may also be an expert, has to fight three times harder for you to recognize him/her as a person 'to learn from'. When I say immigrant I include here people from all social stratus, cultural backgrounds, ethnicity, race, genre and working in all kinds of works (from the handmade based to the intellectually oriented). The specific problem with these divisions I'm trying to put together is that they are based on colonialist histories, racist education and prejudice in general between nations which is something that was artificially created to make some nations more powerful and better than others, so they still respond to the nation-state ideology.

On top of this, most immigrants come alone or with very weak links to a community in the new place so, inevitably, those links to become a collective are mostly (but not only) related to

general assumptions like religion, to someone coming from the same original town, to cultural habits, etc. But this is a forced situation. While you may define yourself as more Mexican than when you are in Mexico or more Japanese than when you are in Japan because you are defining yourself in front of others who may not know but generalities (mostly about food and music, tourism or something from the news) about the place you come from. So the first educational battle an immigrant has to be part of is not their “assimilation” to the new place but to teach the people (s)he encounters in their new living place that (s)he is a complex human being like everyone else. So the idea of *Immigrant Movement International* (IM International) is to empower immigrants and to educate U.S. residents and citizens. We want immigrants to be seeing as political beings.

In terms of the relationship between my teaching philosophy and my thinking as an artist, I believe that political art is an educational tool. If you do political art you are dealing with the access, the understanding and the dissemination of knowledge. Education does the same thing. In both cases you have to educate the people you’re dealing with in the subject so you can have a conversation that is fruitful. In both cases there are power relationships in place. Both have the effect to make you see reality differently. And that can create something beyond the knowledge itself. In order to create a reaction, in order to create a consequence from your work, which is what I mean by political, you have to inform people but also give them the tools to analyze on their own.

When art gives you the answer it is propaganda.

But if it gives you all the elements for you to think, it is political art and you can do something with that. I feel that my work is related to education, but there are many ways to educate and to deal with knowledge. I am very interested in emotional knowledge: not only factual knowledge or abstract knowledge, which I like a lot, but also emotional knowledge. This is why I always say the phrase transforming *social affect into political effectiveness* because I feel that this is what I want from education; to come from the emotional aspect of ones’ perspective. Why *the emotional*? Because it is the unresolved aspect of yourself, it is something you have to negotiate and re-evaluate all the time, it is not a stable element, it is *changing* knowledge. Hopefully your perspective will evolve.

Does that answer your question?

Yeah. I had a thought. Can you describe your social and emotional journey up to this point, answer that in an academic realm or as a student; answer it however you want to answer it...

Basically when I say emotional, I mean how you process what is happening? What tools you chose to deal with a certain situation?, how much of yourself you invest? Politics have an emotional investment if it is to be real. It is very hard to engage with a politician that can’t show how they handle emotions and how they engage emotionally even if that means sometimes control over their emotions. The effective part of politics is the sensitization of people, whether an individual or the masses. When you can’t locate the emotional *tessitura* of a politician, when you can’t understand his investment either in time or emotions, that impossible location of the honestly emotional becomes distrust. This is something that goes beyond factual knowledge about their good or bad political decisions. You have to trust how much the person -in the politician- is involved and giving to that investment.

My social emotional journey... I don't know how to answer that question... It's a continual discovery because you never have all the information. I feel like I'm constantly learning, I'm a socially inadequate person, I don't know the proper rules, proper behaviors. I always have to negotiate what I should be doing (or what I think people expect me to do) and what I want to do. I am always negotiating with others. The social and the emotional is a struggle, this is how it is for everybody. The struggle to forget that we are part of a society is for me the real state of freedom. As artists we just concentrate more on those contradictions. Politicians also concentrate on those contradictions. As artists we try to understand, expose, challenge, implement the desired state of freedom; politicians try to put rules and conditions to feel free. I never want to do what people want me to do; that's the only moment I feel like I have social freedom, which is different from feeling political freedom. The only time I can be socially free is when I privilege the personal desire over the social expectation.

When I say desire I mean the personal desire to imagine social engagement differently and to try to live life that way, instead of accommodating rules.

There's an interesting corollary there in your thoughts on having all the answers. There's an interesting relationship to these thoughts and your thoughts on freedom. You don't necessarily know the right way or even that standard but your just moving through it and it's requiring you to develop your own ideas about it through your experiences.

Well you know how I teach, I improvise a lot, I navigate those spaces with as much freedom as I can.

Yeah.

I feel like one problem we have in society is that people have had their rights to imagine another way of doing things taken. There is this normalization of things that should not be normal at all. Like for example, certain social expectations....

Like what, give me an example

Like how you have to behave with people; -when there isn't any danger to the other person- all these codes are, in part, formulated to make other people feel good above your own happiness. They do not acknowledge the intoxicating power of happiness but its restriction. I really value people who are socially awkward or at least think seriously about what kind of relationships THEY want to create.

Recently someone was talking to me about futurity. I am a big advocate of this. I like that it talks about living the future *now* even if the conditions aren't ready for you to do it. You have to allow yourself the freedom to imagine how you want things to be. Social codes are such a burden. I understand there are certain limits. I always say that laws are designed for the abnormal moments instead of the normal moments. Laws would not be necessary if education was good. Education is in part propaganda for the legal system. Education is futurity.

One time in a small town in Germany there was an empty street and people were waiting for the light to change to cross the street. And I asked one anxious woman, why do you need to wait? there are no cars for the next twenty minutes. Because the light have not changed. I could see her anxiety, resulting of pressing time, growing. I feel the same way about social

behavior, how we are codified ... even if it's not adequate, even if it's ridiculous. There is no need for certain behaviors to happen.

And I'm the same with education, the way I teach is tailored to the place. Like at University of Chicago I needed to be chaotic.

You needed to be chaotic?

Yes, because there was so much structure, there was such a strong culture of the place. I enjoyed not knowing what I was going to do. Lets have this journey together because I don't know what's going to happen. I know I could only do that in such a structured environment. In Paris where I teach, the first group I encountered was very dependent on their professors, so I oblige them to grow. Each time I go back, I am extremely structured and disciplined because it can easily go the other way. There, their challenge is that they have to work very hard. At University of Chicago their challenge was to enjoy freedom a bit more, to go out of the rules for once. On the other hand I tried to not talk about any American artists, I tried to bring up people from Latin America and other places because that's the information you didn't have. I needed you to have the other side of the coin.

So wait, I'm curious, how was my teaching?

Well, it was a little chaotic. However, when you were present, you were really present. It was really challenging to have you as a teacher for my first quarter in graduate school. I had all these other clear expectations in my other classes and then your class was hard to figure out.

Now here's the thing. I feel like a lot of the students at the University of Chicago are so wired to succeed and to please their professors for a good grade.

I guess it was hard because at that point I didn't know how to be a student. When I had your seminar I didn't know how to navigate the system. It was just challenging.

I benefited from you more later on, once I was comfortable in my skin within the institution.

I don't know if you remember when you asked us in that seminar about our second profession. Do you remember that?

...

Basically you said, "If you weren't an artist, what would be your second profession?" and it was so entertaining to think about how each of us already imbued our practice with this *second* profession. And I think about that to this day.

I don't treat students as students.

Yeah.

I mean I try to. I know there are times I have to be authoritative. But I try as much as possible to be a "teacher" while also being somebody who wants to have a conversation with you and

try to figure out why you do things. And I feel like I always try as much as possible to treat students as my future colleagues, which is happening right now for many of my past students. I think this is important for three reasons: I want people to know that I respect them even if they are “in formation,” secondly it is a way to pressure people to grow a little bit and third it is an attempt to give hope to people, because it is so hard, especially in the United States, to feel that you can make it as an artist. So if I start treating you as an artist instead of a student you will behave and think as such and you start figuring it out, so you leave the school as a young artist not just as someone who graduated and have to take a job to pay loans.

Yes. When I went to art school I felt as though I had been making art for a while, though I had come to school later it was happily so. I had crossed a lot of mental struggles years and years previous that other people hadn't, and so I felt very happy the moment I went to grad school. However, in all these arenas you have these “student” moments that have the look and feel of being a student. And then, in your class, to not have that happen was just a hard and wonderful time because you are also getting to know your fellow students.

But I think your group worked well, no?

Yeah. I liked and like them a lot. We had a really good group and I feel really lucky, especially in hearing stories years later of people not having the same sorts of bonds.

It is the same with the people from *Arte de Conducta*, they are all really good friends. And I feel that for me, this is very important. When you start teaching, one of the first things you teach is not to be a selfish artist, but to have the understanding that you are part of a generation. It is fine that everybody tries to work towards the same goal but it is important to eliminate this kind of competitive attitude that a lot of professors are engaged in. It is better to be peers and colleagues.

Yes.

Another reason why I like to treat students as artists is because I really don't like when people treat the work students do as if it is not going to be important. That's not true. I mean I grew up as an artist looking at Ana Mendieta's works. A significant part of her production, which we see in museums and galleries, was done when she was a student. It came from her days at school in Iowa. That really marked me. For example, I think the work Matthew Metzger or yours made in his days as a student will be shown and evaluated as his work without the 'student' adjective. It would only be judged by the intensity and guts you put on them. Would those be his or you best work? I don't know. My work *Homage to Ana Mendieta* was done when I was a student and it is still a point of reference in my work and it has been studied and presented in books by art historians. I understand that school can be a moment when you are experimenting and when you are trying new things. But there are all these relevant artists who were “kids” when they made all this amazing work. All these “kids” that are going to school now are their same age. I think it puts pressure on the students to take their work seriously.

I always say to them, try to work now as if your work is in preparation for a solo show in fifty years. Try to do art as if you could be proud of what you do now in fifty years.

How do you think growing up in Cuba shaped these ideas?

When I was growing up, it was the times of the *generation de los ochenta* (generation of the eighties) happening, and a lot of what I took from that time was the energy around the work. The energy was maybe more important than the work itself. The work was almost more of a justification to have that energy, to generate an internal revolution and to allow yourself the desire for things. I am still looking for that in my work. This experience gave me a less pristine and less delicate relationship to form and production. I feel like my work now is less about producing art and more about generating situations. I do teach with the same amount of permissibility and freedom I give to myself when I make art.

I am a professor that can be wrong and doubtful and ignorant, I'm a student. I don't like hierarchies. All of my professors in Havana were non-hierarchical. You knew they were important and you respected them as artists because they were the best practitioners at that moment, but there was always this friendship that was happening. The other thing is that I believe in the class outside of the classroom, the moment in which the student does not believe he is learning, the moment when the student does not believe he has to pay attention. I like this the most. Going out with students to have coffee and talking. Those are the moments when I feel I can be most effective... although now you've told me I made you do this exercise and now you're traumatized by it.

Oh, I'm not traumatized.

Exactly but you know... look, people from your class are all still friends and talking, that is what I value. Teaching for me is not just one or two semesters. I have a lot of problems with institutional structures. I feel my teaching is still happening now. It is sharing and it is talking together and it takes all these forms and formats. Just like the other day when we were all together catching up. I loved it. We were in a house together and teaching was about catching up. You didn't do it to show me your assignments. I don't know why we did it. Maybe we just enjoy each other's company.

Imagine.

That is what I like. Sometimes what I am setting up are questions people cannot answer right away. And when you tell me you are still thinking about those questions, it makes me happy, because that is what I want.

That was such a harsh critique.

Yeah? Oh sorry.

No, no, don't be sorry.

I always think that to value the time in school is to value intense, harsh and constructive critique with your peers, because when you leave it is rare for you have a group of friends like you guys, who can come together and still talk about work. And that is very rare and nice.

I feel really lucky that I can meet with these people collectively or independently.

I remember when you guys were about to graduate you were in this panic mode. You asked me “what am I going to do now, what am I going to do!” And I remember I would talk to you and Marilyn about what you could do.

That year after school was tough.

I knew it was going to be tough. And my recommendation to you was to get together, to try to still meet for critique, because I knew this was going to help during this transitional moment. My only advice was not to disengage and not to lose the critical structure that school gave you. So I was so happy when I went there the other night and everyone was there and you guys still meet. This is what I am proud of as a professor. Not a grade or all that. It was about giving you guys a structure that can function positively for your creativity. I am not a technical person, so I would never teach you how to edit a video.

Do you have any moment that you felt was a big learning moment as a student that then carried over into who you’ve become as an educator?

When I was twelve to fifteen years old, those were the most important years for me. We had this Professor, Juan Francisco Elso, who brought us out of the studio at school and into the countryside, trying to make us understand that art can be done somewhere else. I have always learned more outside school than inside.

I feel like who I became as a human being was shaped when I was between 12-16. Those years shaped everything.

Those were instrumental years in learning about myself. You have certain tenets that you live by that you can’t go back on as an artist. Being present was really important to me at that age. And I believe that now, face-time with people and friends. Figuring out a way to meet in person.

When we talk about education there is a point when you’re not really learning rather you are implementing stuff, you are learning how to position things rather than doing something new. Learning about who you are is the same way.

Do you feel like you have any failures as a student that you think about as an educator?

I really thought I wasn’t good at anything until I found performance, very inadequate. So I thought about that as a professor. To give people the space to feel that way and then encourage them. People spend a lot of time doing what they don’t like. I put students in a very extreme situation so they have to choose.

How then do you challenge your own feelings of inadequacy?

I like to be vulnerable because the student needs to be able to rebel against me. I think your group did that at some point. And that for me is a success.

Yeah.

It means that if you were able to confront me you will do that with other people in authority. A lot of art education right now is teaching submissiveness and and complacency which is

maybe a way to surrender before you even start; which later is replaced to other structures of power, they are later translated into the gallery or curatorial endeavors. These structures of power, you should be subverting. So I feel that if you learn that it's ok to question and to rebel with your professor you can do it to other people.

I know this cannot be done with everything kind of education, but in my case I think education should be beyond grades. It should be about really wanting to do something amazing.

I'm not sure if it was with you guys but I said at one point, "you grade yourselves"

Yeah, I think that was.

Also, there is an ethical tension because you want a good grade but also you're doing this in public. At the same time is a way to tell you that you are only competing with yourself, so you have to learn how to judge and measure your own progress.

I remember in Venice (at IUAV) one year, I gave an exercise on authority, and one of the students wanted to challenge me as a professor. She wanted to have elections in the class to see if I should continue to be a professor or if she should take over. And I loved it. I said great, lets talk to the director and let her be the judge. She almost fainted. I took it to the next level, the one where there could be consequences, I could get fired or at least it looked that way then... The student presented her teaching philosophy to the class. Then I presented mine. The director intervned to explain the philosophy of the school then everyone voted and we counted the votes. I thought it was fantastic because it was the manifestation of questioning .

Do you think that situation could happen in the US?

There are very different conditions between classes in the US, Europe and Cuba. First of all, the US is extremely structured and have a type of pressure that can almost feel like academic repression. On the other hand, it is very clear the amount of money you're paying and how many years you are going to be paying back.

All your life.

So the professor almost feels like a service provider. The society of service is very strong in the U.S. People feel that they want something for their money. It is an exchange not an experience. It is a transaction for a paid service. I'm paying so much so you better give me a good quality product. There is a kind of tension in the US around money that is the wrong pressure in the classroom.

Do you feel like that capitalist sentiment effects you, not having grown up here?

That's not what I want from learning. Of course you want to get something out of the experience, but immediate gratification is extremely problematic. Then there is this kind of codification of what you can expect in a class.

Then again, I can only do that because the rest of the people are not like me.

That's a good point, it seems like that sentiment would be more profound not having grown up in this culture, like you would have a different relationship to it. That makes sense.

It changes a lot of stuff. I understand more and more. I have a friend doing amazing, activist work that she loves and she feels like she's growing, but in May her loans are coming up and she can't continue doing this work. The fact that she has to leave working on something she is so passionate about says a lot of how the education industry has changed from being the provider of knowledge to a chain that you are attached to, almost a punishment for doing the right thing.

It's almost a call for ignorance or primitivism. Why would anyone want 80,000 dollars in debt? I'm sorry to say that to you, I know that it might be a huge thing for you. That's what pisses me off. The right thing to do is to grow and learn, so you have a better chance to be happier.

Right.

We can talk about something else.

I believe pretty strongly in what you're talking about. I feel like that was a huge motivator in accepting the position at a city college. There's this idea that it's available to anyone. Of course, that's an idea, it still costs money but is much cheaper than other institutions and it is public. It's interesting for me, because I can't help but wonder if people don't care as much there because they are paying less.

Do you feel that? Do you feel like people don't care?

I have a broad spectrum of students, from really committed students to students that aren't invested at all.

Do you think they are not invested because they are fulfilling requirements? Many times an art class is just that. So instead of getting frustrated with that, I have a question. What is art for? In art school we assume that people are interested in art, but what I like about community college, they really highlight what art is for.

What is interesting about those schools is that, you have the chance to maybe present other means to incorporate art into their lives. Art can be a device for many other things other than self-referencing the practice itself.

I've spent a good portion of time wondering what I'm doing wrong.

That's teaching.

I believe in my participation in that institution. However, I need to change how I think about art and people. I feel like it's changing me as an artist.

That's the best thing that could happen. If you were elsewhere like the University of Chicago, we would not be having this conversation. You work at a place that is not prestigious for the art world. This is not the dream job. Why? Because it's assumed that such a position is not

going to advance your career. But what if you do something with that. What if this experience advance your art work, that is what is important and a gift, transformation instead of social positioning.

There is still this embarrassment that is inherited (especially if you're young and you want to demonstrate that you are a valuable artist) when you are doing things in places that don't have prestige or cache in the art world. This is so silly, it is not about where you do it, unless you want to steal the aura of the institution. It is about what are you doing. The only thing that matters is what kind of project you are proposing.

Do you know the KOS kids? Tim Rollins and the KOS. Something marvelous happened because the artist didn't think about their careers. Instead he was thinking... : How can I make art be for them?

Right.

That should be the question you're asking yourself right now. How can art transform people's lives?

I have to tell you, I go into class and I don't think about the art world. I only can think about who I can bring to the classroom that will help them understand, to help them use tools to figure out more about themselves. Because I know the value of self-awareness.

That is great. What do you want with what you are doing? Why do you care about that?

I'm constantly reiterating how serious I take the class and in a way I have to reiterate it to myself.

Yeah but it can't be a job. The beauty of art is how free you can be. You really can decide who you want to be. They should understand the power of that.

You said it.

You should forget about teaching art and make them enjoy art.

That's that the thing, I enjoy art. But I don't know what the fuck I'm doing.

I think this is a good start.

1 I was a student of Tania Bruguera's from 2007-09. I attended the Havana Biennial in 2009 and met many of the students of Cátedra Arte de Conducta. I co-created the project ARTE NO ES FÁCIL with Marilyn Volkman where we work closely with many of those artists that participated in Cátedra Arte de Conducta, traveling back to Havana in 2011 and again in 2014 for exhibitions.