

To Form

In 2008, Inés Katzenstein asked me to come up with a twelve-session workshop for the annual program for artists she was preparing for the Universidad Di Tella. I put together a repertoire of basic materials and of topics to address. Mainly, an intersection of concerns linked to the traditional visual fundamentals taught at art schools in the West and topics related to the history and philosophy of representation, semiology, and the fine art and architecture traditions. I drew on my experience with artists and curators in classrooms to create what I called “To Form.” The class was part of the Artists’ Program’s curriculum in 2009, 2011, 2015, and 2018.

Adaptable and versatile, the verb to form is pertinent to contemporary art practice, whether that practice makes use of matter, language, text, or context. At stake is an experience of giving and taking, of learning through sharing in the act of forming. A form can be made with anything—material or immaterial—making combinations that yield something that can take shape and be shared in the physical space.

I like thinking that the exercises performed in “To Form” call on individuality and being together as a group in a new experience of making: one’s own practice, the practice of others, and our practice together. The training consists of making without preambles, sticking to the guideline, and then observing closely according to other multifocal guidelines of analysis to be able to compare different levels of experience and points of view regarding what the process has yielded.

Between action and matter there is a world of infinities; between matter and thought, others. The vastness that unfolds between visual, spatial, spiritual, material, emotion, and sensory perception. Forms, like understanding, are witness to that vastness. The exercises in “To Form” attempt, quite simply, to reveal and capture something of all that.

The work in the classroom revolves around brief but intense pragmatic experiences and making forms. The guide-lines should be open, complex, and engaging enough to keep difficulty and mystery afloat. They should also be provocative, keep expectations open and the desire to continue questioning, reexamining, and reformulating alive.

In “To Form,” the guideline must be understood and executed. The material is also part of the guideline, and for the exercise to work you have to follow the instructions. The classroom is equipped with the materials: a dictionary, a clock, tables and chairs, sheets of A3 and A4 paper, scissors, pencils, tape, clay, water, modelling boards and tools. Each session lasts for three to four hours with no break. Since all the materials are in the classroom, all the participant has to do is arrive on time and work until the end.

The success of “To Form” depends entirely on collective participation. What is produced during the exercise is not kept; it is never exhibited later or presented to juries for assessment—the class is precarious by nature. Judgement and expectation on formal quality are suspended in the classroom. The idea is to make and analyze forms (not ideas).

The result is a crisis of sorts: something that appears in the interplay between the exercise’s guideline, and the skill and openness of each participant, their willingness to produce in a game played alone and/or in groups. The idea is to shape something that is enough of a thing, that has enough of a material body, to be read and conveyed.

Graphite and paper and wet clay are basic and structural elements of art’s praxis. Perhaps that is one of the reasons that the exercises in “To Form” are, in appearance, simple and appealing. They enable quick, complex, and detailed works that yield immediate results of all sorts (sketches, voids and hollows, masses, concepts and ideas, plans, chiaroscuros, lines, letters,

volumes in high and low relief, freestanding pieces, and smudges).

Each participating artist observes and remarks on what has been made by an(other)(s) rather than what he or she has made. It takes time to learn how to create and pay attention as a group, and mutual respect is required. The one who speaks has to make sure he or she is understood, which means learning to develop and articulate a vocabulary. It is not a question of stating what one wanted or tried to do, but rather of making way for interpretation and comprehension and for the voice of (an)other(s).

The first guideline revolves around words, a variety of themes and topics, in an attempt to formulate contemporary dilemmas pertinent to the group; I present them along with concepts and words either taken from the world of composition or design, or directly tied to perspectives (modes of seeing and points of view). Those words and concepts are triggers for the exercise. Some examples: utopia-projection and balance; inclusion-paradox-cadence and asymmetry; transference-repetition; metonymy-identical; ideal-similar or revolution-reflex/reflection.

The second guideline is a list of arguments-questions that everyone must heed and that provide a means to interrogate or take further the forms that have been created. I change the list around over the course of the workshop's sessions in order to multiply cruxes of analysis. By way of example, this is an observation grid (of Western-essentialist origin) on seven levels:

1. Describe the physical form;
2. Describe the form's emotion;
3. Describe the form's sentimental state;
4. Describe the form's structure of thought;
5. Describe the conformation of the self;
6. Describe the soul (in the West, that word is often used in relation to certain situations; in the art field above all, it tends to be used automatically and unconsciously); and
7. Describe the spirit (another colloquial word very common in art, which is why I think it is worth working with).

Art deals with—among other things—the mysterious, the religious, the hidden or less visible, and the unconscious. Re-examining the use of those terms and the

representation formats that enable those concepts to be tuned or reformulated is a good challenge for artists in training. In 2018, "To Form" addressed the concepts of movement, change, hollow/mass in the Taoist *Feng Shui* tradition.

To yield fruits, the exercises require, among other things, repetition and gradual accumulation of variants. The effects of the practice are delayed, which means that both the institution and participants must muster patience and trust in the various moments in learning cycles. The class's spirit is intuitive and mental; the challenge of re-examining and naming or describing the unconscious, the unfinished, the unfathomable, the excessive and the grotesque must be assumed as part of the tacit contractual agreement one enters into by participating in the workshop.

The coordinator of "To Form," meanwhile, must ensure that each instance of the exercise is engaged to the fullest and that the maximum potential of the group and of each of its members is reached. At the same time, the coordinator must help each person find his or her voice, his or her specific tone.

Everyone strives to generate and maintain critical curiosity and a spirit of openness. That means questioning commonplaces, prejudices, assumptions and suppositions. Because they have to present the forms created to the audience of their classmates on the spot, participants reel in, both individually and collectively, the insecurity they might feel before the group. These immediate presentations are a sort of antidote to insecurity as well as the basis for a new collective layer of courage, learning, and understanding.

Most of the artist-Program participants are very engaged in the demanding and fast-past world of contemporary art. Its vertigo, pressure, and competition are rooted in a production system that seeks formal efficacious market success. "To Form" meanwhile, offers a sort of eccentric cave of work, a space both apart and part. The challenge is self-observation.

The idea, then, is to listen to the guidelines, to make, to form, to create, to take distance, and to learn to observe, to develop vocabulary, and to hone perception. To read what others produce and train careful listening, the peripheral con-centration at stake in comparing reading of others with one's own experience, and the variety of intentions, desires, concepts, sensibilities, skills, and so forth at play. A pragmatic field that,

because of the speed of the production and the precariousness of the results, always resembles a sketch of something in potential or raw state, almost a failure. Despite that generous state of insecurity at odds with what might be considered a formal achievement, the process of making and analyzing is trained, as is the ability to communicate, converse, and exchange passions, ideas, opinions, and perceptions.

The specific aim is to develop curiosity, the ability to be astonished, as well as group language and activity. To provide a basis for making and knowing, understanding the importance of commitment, criticism, and chance in making in the art field, to try to articulate the relationship between all of that and one's self with society.

Mónica Giron. 2019

Note

I have my eye set on both international contemporary art and what is produced by my colleagues closer at hand. I have proceeded for years as if investigation into symbolic-practical knowledge were inevitable, delving into and training in practices like Taoist *Feng Shui* and in the arts of interpretation tied to mythological archetypes like astrology.

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