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Documentation of an art project as part of the Instituto Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (IENBA) 'Extensión' programme, Barrio Reus, Montevideo, 1992-93

Anarchism, Education and Compromise: Voices from Montevideo

— Anne Szefer Karlsen

One typically enters the contemporary art school – or, at least, those that are part of a formal educational institution – via a reception area with a receptionist or guard, reporting oneself as a visitor or swiping a student/staff card. Students enter these institutional spaces to be conditioned into subjects that contribute to one or many different communities upon exiting. Art schools today are increasingly governed by their administrators (certainly in Europe, following the Bologna Process); many are guided by the idea that their graduates should become neoliberal entrepreneurs, and some have other, equally reactionary ideas of what an artist is and should do. Oftentimes all of these attitudes mix together, creating complex subjectivation processes for the art student.

On Monday afternoons, from 6 p.m. onwards, the auditorium at Instituto Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (IENBA) in Montevideo, Uruguay is unlocked to let in a crowd of *primer año* (first-year) students, who queue through the school's typically ordinary reception area, spilling out onto the street. The large, steep auditorium, La Bombonera, is one of the most characteristic spaces of IENBA. It was built in 1985 by students and staff as part of the reopening of the faculty of fine arts after the end of the military dictatorship (1973-85), to accommodate a huge influx of students wanting to study art.¹ This text is based on a series of interviews conducted with current and former staff, students and graduates of the IENBA,²

but it should not be read as a balanced assessment of the school as an institutional construction; nor is it intended to map its history.³ Rather, it is an attempt to think through the relation between art education and the subjectivation processes of artists, and through the reproduction of the social role of the artist instigated by formal art education.⁴ The legacy of IENBA's student-led reform of the curriculum following an occupation in the late 1950s also provides a lesson in the complicated and often prosaic processes of compromise that can follow moments of radical institutional change.

European influences in Uruguay have long been strong due to its colonial history.⁵ The Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, or ENBA (the school was renamed IENBA in 1993), was founded in 1943 as an independent art school in line with the traditional French academy model, and reported directly to the Ministry of Education and Culture.⁶ In the late 1950s a new law was passed to make higher education independent from political government, and ENBA and the music academy Conservatorio Nacional de Música were established as autonomous faculties of the Universidad de la República in Montevideo, no longer susceptible to the political influence of the Ministry. These structural changes could have been implemented without controversy, and the French academy model, with its aesthetic ideology and master's ateliers, could have continued undisturbed; however, as artist and educator

but it should not be read as a balanced assessment of the school as an institutional construction; nor is it intended to map its history.³ Rather, it is an attempt to think through the relation between art education and the subjectivation processes of artists, and through the reproduction of the social role of the artist instigated by formal art education.⁴ The legacy of IENBA's student-led reform of the curriculum following an occupation in the late 1950s also provides a lesson in the complicated and often prosaic processes of compromise that can follow moments of radical institutional change.

- 1 Teacher Gonzalo Vicci Gianotti claims that the closing of IENBA was because of a 'conflict with the University, because of a situation with the Communist Party that tried to influence the internal elections of IENBA'. I have chosen to reference/foreground the source that experienced the events, but have conflicting information about the events of the closing of the IENBA. Following the dictatorship, art and psychology were apparently the two most popular subjects at the university.
- 2 These interviews were mainly conducted between 10 and 21 August 2015, on a research trip supported by Bergen City's Theory Development Grant and the Bergen Academy of Art and Design. Some interviews were conducted in Spanish with simultaneous translation. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations and information about the school's history are taken from these interviews.
- 3 Indeed, considering the anarchist ideology underpinning many of the operations and teachings of the institution, there is a particularly problematic aspect to narrating its history. Here, history belongs to each participant in the common endeavour that is IENBA, rather than to select voices heard through a few documents.
- 4 I am not discussing independent initiatives or alternative education structures in this text.
- 5 Professor Javier Alonso notes, as did several other interviewees, that 'this school has its origin in the 1950s, and takes up what Uruguay understood as modernity through the trips that artists made to Europe'.
- 6 In general, I use IENBA to refer to the school.



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Luis Camnitzer notes, IENBA was always a school with anarchist leanings. At the end of the 1950s, propelled by individuals within the school itself, IENBA was going through an altogether different set of structural changes – more far-reaching than the bureaucratic yet politically significant shift that came about as a result of the new law. In 1958, a group of students felt compelled to conduct a sit in to prevent any kind of party-based politicisation of the school:

There was dissent in the school about curricular reform. The right-wing and dogmatic communists wanted to keep the school academic and at a certain point planned to take over the school. We got wind of that, so we sat in – and took over the school. Then the university intervened. The conservative faculty [of ENBA] countered that unless the intervention was lifted, they would resign. We managed, with the Student Federation and the Council of the University, to keep the intervention so that de facto the faculty resigned. Simultaneously the group of students and ex-students who were part of the sit in had devised a new study plan. There was a strong interest in curricular reform.⁷

Building on pedagogical models such as the Bauhaus and the writings of John Dewey and Herbert Read, the reformist group produced a new study plan influenced by anarchist pedagogy; subsequently, a new curriculum was passed by the new faculty's governing body, which now consisted of democratically elected students, staff and graduates. The intention of the study plan was for the curriculum to be revised on a regular basis; the student assembly also demanded that teachers retain their positions for only five years, with the understanding that the initial generation of teachers help identify their successors.⁸

Gonzalo Vicci Gianotti, a teacher within the Unit of Teaching Support at IENBA, links the reform to the political climate that resulted in the closure of the school during the dictatorship:

IENBA was associated to the anarchists, so there was a lot of other political factions trying to influence over the school, and IENBA always tried to resist in some kind of third way: not being on the political right nor the political left, but trying to remain independent. IENBA was this place where there was a mixture of people

⁷ Luis Camnitzer was among the first staff at ENBA after the reform. There are some discrepancies in the interview material regarding the exact date of the reform, suggesting that the study plan was passed in 1959 but implemented from 1960.

⁸ As related by Camnitzer, as well as other interviewees.

with very different political opinions. There were Tupamaros, communists, people from all the political factions that during the 60s existed as resistance, all these things that were warming up and ended in the coup.

In the decade following the sit in, the notion of *active teaching*, a core pedagogical approach at IENBA, was established. The idea remains all-encompassing to this day, dictating how the school is run right down to the cleaning of La Bombonera.⁹ Staff member Mariela de Cola characterises active teaching as 'a new methodology, where the student is at the centre of education. All the things have to be felt by the student ... lived by the student, before you talk about the concept. First is the experience and after is the conceptualisation.' In the first year, for example, students might spend one day on exercises involving perception of colour, shape, image, volume and space, followed by a day of reflection, framing the exercises within an art historical context.¹⁰

The educational aim of active teaching is to transpose this knowledge towards different communities beyond the student body. Professor and former director Samuel Sztern explains that these community projects, conducted as part of the annual Extensión project, are devised so that 'the students get involved with needs in the social context. It's not directly answering what the community asks [of the artists], but about being able to determine what

The paradox seen at IENBA was an attempt to institutionalise a set of anti-institutional ideals.

the community needs to grow. [...] The leitmotif of Extensión in the school is to introduce art in everyday life.' He emphasises the Extensión project of 1965-66 as particularly successful, when the school 'declared a war on grey' and came up with a palette of 'bold colours' that

were applied to the façades of houses in the Barrio Sur area of Montevideo (a project that was also repeated in Barrio Reus in 1992-93). Valeria Lepra began her studies at the school in 2004, taking an active part in its politics, and is today an assistant teacher for *Primer Período* (the first three years of study); she notes that although active teaching has a clear position on the role an artist should take in the community, 'the curriculum doesn't imply that the student will be an artist, and the degree does not guarantee that you will have an artist career'.

Yet despite institutional claims of commitment to social engagement, Extensión fails to move past the trope of 'bringing art to the people' and has not recruited the support of artists invested in social practice. Artist Ana Laura Lopez de la Torre attended the *primer año* in the late 1980s, before moving on to study art in Spain and the UK, where she investigated pedagogical approaches to training in social art practice. She highlights the value of Extensión for a large number of students in facilitating experiences beyond the studio, in community settings, but she suggests that this value is diminished by a 'patronising' and 'parachuting' conceptualisation of art in social contexts.

The reform in 1959 was also a mild reform: it did not overthrow the French academy model in its entirety. Rather, an additional course of study to the existing master's ateliers was devised, doubling the course of study at IENBA to six years in total. (Given the complex political forces operating within the school at the time, perhaps such a compromise attests to a certain pragmatism on behalf of the reformers.) Sztern, who entered the school as a student in 1969 and was appointed a teacher when IENBA reopened in 1985, describes these two *periodos*, established in 1959 and still in use today:

⁹ Samuel Sztern: 'Freedom is something that needs to be learned. It's not that the docents abandon the authoritarian parameters and we are all free. Freedom is responsibility and a lot of other things. It takes some time for a student who comes accustomed to authoritarian practices to develop a non-authoritarian behaviour. So the first year in the school has this role: to de-structure the relation between students and professor. We refuse ... for the classroom to be cleaned by the staff because the first act of responsibility from the students should be to be in charge of their own mess. Which means that most of the time, we do the cleaning. But still. They start to understand this. Some of them say that they clean only if someone sends them. Or in other words, they need someone telling them what to do.'

¹⁰ Gonzalo Vicci Gianotti: 'During the first three years there is a focus on phenomena of perception and art history. In active teaching this is about interest centres, first experienced by the interest of students, and then there is a group analysis of the experience. The Renaissance is an interest centre, for example Teaching of the Renaissance is being organised this way, at least when I did it: there is a stage at the front of the auditorium, the professors would be wearing costumes, the live model lit by candle light, mulled wine is served. The students come and don't know what they are going to see, so they come into the experience with mulled wine and a pot of stew, and they have to draw the model. Next day, they analyse what happens during this experience of the previous day, what happened to the student, what were the outcomes.'

The first cycle is about introspection, about self-recognition, about getting to know the expressive elements and their cultural and historical antecedents – colour, painting, space, time, etc. Segundo Período [the last three years of study] is about choosing a specific language, such as photography, ceramics, etc., and to develop the aesthetic view of that language in the ateliers.

The initial stage of 'self-recognition' happens in La Bombonera every Monday in two shifts. The following five years of study involve two years of highly directed teaching of what seems to be canonised European art history, without access to the workshops, followed by three years of self-directed art-making in an atelier led by one of five professors.¹¹ This structure shows the paradox of the reform of nearly seventy years ago: despite their conservatism, the master's ateliers were not discarded in 1959, which in effect has forced multiple pedagogical models to coexist – with all the underlying tensions such a situation implies. The atelier programme has survived many different logics; today, for instance, it is linked to an option to pursue a BA qualification within the six-year programme.¹²



And just as the master's ateliers seemed reactionary to the 1950s reformists, some voices within and outside of the school now observe that the methods and structures of the 1959 study plan must be revised. Coordinator Fernando Miranda links this to the question of lived experience:

We still have staff who lived through that period, actually. Their ideas haven't changed, but they have tested and experienced them. My question is about the new teachers because I see a lot of them repeating those ideas mechanically.

11 G. Vicci Gianotti: 'One of the critiques against the school is that the school works just a little with Latin American art, and even less with non-Western art. It is chronological history. In [the second year you are exposed to] Dadaism, Futurism – until the twentieth century. Pop art would be the last.' Lucía Episcopo also notes that students cannot access the workshops in the school for independent work or training during the second and third year of study.

12 G. Vicci Gianotti connects this to recent structural developments within the school whereby there now is an option to treat the three years within an atelier as a BA as long as the student follows a media-specific specialisation – 'at least one attempt at integrating the school in an international context'. Professor Javier Alonso describes how it was difficult for students who were applying for graduate studies abroad before the BA was established: 'We had to invent all this documentation to prove what they had done at the school.'

Miranda calls for a 'reform of the reform' because the school is in need of 'practices and students that work in contemporary times, not in contemporary art', with part of the problem being that they use 'exercises that were used in Bauhaus, which are one hundred years old'. Student Lucía Episcopo also calls for an updating of the curriculum: 'The education is focussed on the creativity of the individual, but it is a little bit old-fashioned.' She expected there to be more theoretical approaches to art during the course of her education, as well as 'discussion about art; art today, the philosophy of art, the sociology of art'. Students are of all ages and come from many different walks of life, which is in part a consequence of the abolition in 1959 of the entry-level exam, as Episcopo describes: 'Many have already graduated with other university degrees and are working in other professions, but might always have been doing something in art. Some students are senior citizens who finally have time to pursue their interest in art-making.'

The body of younger students that enrol at IENBA can roughly be divided into those in favour of and those opposed to the current pedagogical model. These students are part of a post-dictatorship generation with very different life experiences to their predecessors',



Above and left: Documentation of 'Venta Popular' ('Popular Sale'), 1964 (above) and 1966 (left), which involved the production of objects for a regular public market in Montevideo as part of the 'Extensión' programme

manifesting in what some of the staff identify as a certain kind of individualism, poignantly described by Sztern: 'There isn't anymore a confluence of interests among all the people in the school. There were always different roles to be filled, but we used to share strategies and objectives. I think one of the major triumphs of the dictatorship was to impose individualism.' On the other hand, general developments in society, like the advance of digital technology and increasing acceptance of externally imposed standards of streamlining and efficiency, have also influenced attitudes on education. In Uruguay, as elsewhere, it is easy to trace an increasing 'generalisation' of the student as an individual, which can be understood in connection with the increasing trend of marketisation within higher education. Professor Javier Alonso, head of one of the five ateliers, first came to IENBA as a student in 1959; he ridicules the emergent notion of education as something to be consumed rather than lived: 'I believe education is not dealing with the development of personality, with the development of the subject. Education today is just information. It is like filling a jar with stuff.'

However, the pedagogy of active teaching is also geared towards the individual, which suggests that there are some discrepancies to navigate. Certain expressions of individuality seem to be more accepted than others. For instance, Miranda explains how the pedagogical

training programme called the Unit of Teaching Support, established in 2001 and offered to IENBA teachers, works in subtle opposition to the dominant system:

I think that there within the institution still exists an idea of the artist as genius, even though the discussion revolves around ideas of 'learning by doing'. We [within the Unit of Teaching Support] are trying to break away from the idea of the isolated artist, in collective and transdisciplinary projects involving drama, theatre, media, other visual methodologies, public and private spaces.



With this partial account of the changes at IENBA, I hope to approach the question of how art education favours specific artist-subjects. Art schools in general, and IENBA in particular, can be understood as institutions of sociocultural adaptation (in terms of what kind of art the students are encouraged to make, what debates and discourses they are introduced to and so on), each with their own 'hidden curriculum' – or as Ivan Illich once put it, 'the ceremonial or ritual of schooling itself'.¹³ Valeria Lepira expands: 'The hidden curriculum is everything that happens daily in the institution, but is not documented. Rules that are not formalised, sets of actions, as well as the teachers' perception of their own role and of the institution, the myths they create about the school and how they deal with contingencies.' Said another way: art school as training ground for 'extra-aesthetic demands'.¹⁴ The 'perfect' art student incorporates these demands into their artistic processes early on (such as, in certain programmes, learning how to become an exemplary project manager), thus laying down the foundation for successfully participating in diverse art fields after graduation – and sometimes even before.

At the same time, as Andrea Fraser has pointed out, 'the academic subfield of the art field has undergone an historic development in the past two decades that is making it increasingly autonomous'.¹⁵ Although the formal art school is structurally and financially integrated within wider society, it provides an *extra-social condition* for the art student: they are not yet fully integrated into the art field, nor into society as artists, and can therefore avoid or ignore demands from both the hegemonic art field and society.

With the academic subfield's autonomy from the art field, subjectivation processes instigated by progressive artists outside of education institutions are not necessarily visible to the art student. In other words, education could bring its subjects further away from the field they are studying rather than closer to it. This is likely to amplify the dissonance between subjectivation processes inside and outside the art school, and IENBA can be seen as an example of this. Lucia Episcopo describes how some students call for information about 'what is happening in the art world today that, perhaps, is not happening [within] the institution', and how some of the younger teachers who have 'other interests [...] had to study in other countries or other universities or do some postgraduate studies after finishing their [education] to [further] develop'. The foundational ideology that makes up the narrative of IENBA might not need to be rejected in its entirety – although certain subjects inhabiting the art school already entertain the idea – especially since regular changes in curricula and staff was a demand at the sit in in 1959. The fact that these aims were not carried through, and that the old atelier model was kept, perhaps reflects the paradox seen at IENBA: an attempt to institutionalise a set of anti-institutional ideals.

If we are to take seriously the 1959 reform, aimed at creating long-standing changes in society by educating aesthetically conditioned citizens, can we claim it succeeded? IENBA is still a popular place for a large community of students of all ages to come and spend time and create,¹⁶ and during the course of my interviews there was little mention of outside influences or ruptures in the pedagogy in the last 55 years or so. However, younger staff member Sebastián Alonso did describe the art scene in Uruguay as generally lacking in international

13 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, London: Calder & Boyars Ltd, 1971, p.32.

14 Adrian Piper, 'Power Relations Within Existing Art Institutions', in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (ed.), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009, p.259.

15 Andrea Fraser, 'The Personal and Political Revisited', in Sidsel Meineche Hansen and Tom Vandeputte (ed.), *Politics of Study*, London and Odense: Open Editions and Funen Art Academy, 2015, p.70.

16 Lucia Episcopo: 'In the first year you have 500 students, more or less. Only 250 students continue to the second and third year. In total there must be something like 1000 students in the fourth to sixth grades.'



A class on 'light and shadow' taught by Mariela de Cola in IENBA's auditorium La Bombonera, Montevideo, August 2015. Photograph: Anne Szefer Karlisen

connections; he noted that younger artists with international experience are not hired to teach within the school. Thus, the school may not be encouraging, or opening up to, new influences. The interview material also doesn't reveal a connection to a larger, international art discourse as such – what one might call the 'intellectual market' of art, represented by biennials, museum exhibitions, etc. Nor is IENBA connected to the international contemporary (financial) art market, represented by blue-chip galleries, art fairs, etc.; nor even a wider community of art schools (although this could indicate a deliberate, almost protectionist, strategy).

Though ideas of reform at IENBA do not seem to cohere among students and staff today, during his recent tenure as director Sztern remained strongly influenced by the radical proposal of the 1959 reform, aligning him with vocal student criticism of the ateliers and the *Segundo Periodo*: the 'master's is an idea the school has always fought, as it should have students develop through their own ideas and not the masters' ideas'. However, he places the responsibility of reform on students: 'It is a very complicated political situation which is hard to modify as it is [in the ateliers] that you find the more prestigious people. I believe this situation will change only if the students are willing to do it.' One can also sense a paternalistic approach to reform, one that may be shared more broadly within the institution: 'We have always cared about how the students perceive the teaching, but that doesn't mean that we will do whatever they want. I don't like populism.' Despite this kind of leadership, there are still parts of the student body – one could be tempted to say, more progressive and critical parts – who are inclined to resist the ruling pedagogical models that dominate their school. The question, then, is whether the young IENBA students that have ambitions as so-called professional artists are the victims of over-identification with a neo-colonial art field embedded in the subjectivation processes of contemporary capitalism – which would be one reading of the drives towards internationalism and individualism indicated in this text. On the other hand, the specific history and situation of the school recommends a more nuanced reading of IENBA as a place that still, despite its contradictions, could potentially offer the possibility to imagine and establish new subjectivation processes for artists – or to reject the artist role, as it is understood in a mainstream and globalised art context, altogether.