

Notes for an Art School

Walid Sadek

A Room With a Conversation
in the Middle

We each harbour a story about corridors. A story about those functional components of domestic architecture we customarily walk and casually forget. Corridors, which may in a child's imagination expand into expansive 'neverlandish' fields unchecked within the father's home. But such a moment is usually short lived, trampled by the pressing demands of a life managed in the efficiency of kitchens, reproductivity of bedrooms, chatter of dining rooms and stupor of TV rooms. Such corridors, and the stories that lie in them like dusty moths dead on the reflective plate behind the glow of a halogen light, are usually of the past. Unless a war happens to visit your city, encroach upon your front yard, intimidate your windows shut and send you scurrying into those corridors again on all fours like the child you once were.

War can hurl us back unprepared into the spaces of childhood, into those secondary spaces, the in-between spaces of parental distraction and patience. There we may find ourselves again crouching close to details forgotten by architect and mother alike: the chipped wainscot, the over-stuffed medicine cabinet, the coat-hanger straining under the weight of derelict sweaters, the perfect geometry of unfnoticed hairballs and the mess of electric cables dangling from the paint-splattered fuse box. It is there, crammed in corridors, that we gradually learn to recognise the architectural end point of war; a corridor packed shut into a room, wishfully a shelter, where the pretences of architecture regress to join the fragility of human flesh.

War can hurl us back into the spaces of our childhood. It can pack a family into a box-like semblance of security with little else to do except listen for sounds and hear too many. The irony lies in the realisation that to listen and hear is an indication that one is alive still. Survival, it seems, is nothing other than hearing much and knowing very little. And yet it is in such corridors, when surviving at the architectural end point of war, that we discover the desire for speech. First, it bursts sporadically, disjointed, words heavy with meaning even if without the couch of proper syntax. Words of a rare ambiguity, more like captions to faces we thought familiar, now crumpled in fear, almost primitive. Then it picks up, longer sentences, words connecting into a speculation, a probable guess. The corridor grows slightly more spacious, almost a room with a conversation in the middle. Granted, this is unlikely to last. For language, no matter how it may thicken, is nevertheless easily deadened by the blasts of bombs. Yet, given the briefest lull, words come around once again, gather into inarticulate lumps then slowly fall into formation like a steady and tireless bacterial activity.

This is not reminiscing about the war, our Lebanese civil war. Much more, it is an attempt to locate a structure and a libidinal drive able to provoke and warrant the making of a place of conversation, one that we can perhaps call an art school. This introduction to the issue of a school of art is obviously in avoidance of the conventional language with which such an issue is usually framed. More importantly, it follows a decision to think critically at the limits of the possible. For clearly neither the premises of a liberal education nor the conditions of the market have either successfully promoted or discouraged art or its teaching. And although artists live and work amongst us and a few art courses are available at universities and other like institutions, the fundamental question of 'why an art school' is yet to be answered. We often hear related questions such as 'why art?' and 'what kind of artist?' But as for art schools, the issue seems less imperious.

After all, art happens in galleries and an artist is most probably born as one. To ask ‘why an art school?’ represents primarily a shift of emphasis from the artist as the subject of conversation to the school as a place of conversation. But to do so, one must think outside the well-rehearsed categories of the academy, the so-called foundation courses and vertical studios. In other words, one must postpone discussion of the ascending and accumulative structure of an art curriculum and consider instead the art school as a place we congregate in rather than a pedagogical structure from which we graduate. Such an approach might allow us to suspend those polemical distinctions between artist and art teacher, between artist and designer, between the paths of the vocation and the demands of the market and face instead what is once more a fundamental question: Why an art school?

Clearly, one answer is almost always at hand. An answer that is as redundant as it has become axiomatic in its obedient repetition by artists, educators and audiences alike: art schools are a cultural necessity. And so we continue to teach art mostly as an added value, a cultural topping. We also continue to hold on to the few art courses offered at universities out of an antiquated moral imperative, a vague suspicion that art must be significant.

It seems to me that this cultural necessity, this moral imperative, promoted within art schools derives primarily from an unquestioned loyalty to the figure of the artist. For if pressed to explain why an art school is culturally necessary, we most often answer that it is so because artists are great. Accordingly, art schools gain legitimacy by claiming a role within the larger world of great artists.¹ In this sense an art school remains a parasitical institution, a worldly temple for the adoration of renowned artists, of patron saints, so to speak. And at the heart of every art school there lies a wish for death and resurrection: that one day a student will transgress and exceed the curriculum, join the gallery of those patron saints and thus provide a renewed reason for the continuance of the art school.² In other words, an art school claims its own justification in the figure of the transgressive and singular artist.

To approach an alternative, one needs to insist that an art school need not be concerned with the making of artists. If successful, such an insistence can provide a shift that will not only set us outside the artist’s biography as a paradigm for the annunciation and flowering of great art, but will also lead us into theorising a project specific to an art school. A project that will possibly found the school as a place of conversation unburdened by loyalty to the ascendant teleology that structures the genre of artists’ biographies. A place of conversation that is not foreclosed by the figure of the artist as a prophecy fulfilled.³ And so to propose a structure recollected from the time of war, when one is besieged by a present without a future and when the rushing pulse of poor bodies turns deafening, is not mere exercising. Rather, it is a search for a structure outside the bounds of the figure of the artist, in what is probably a shared experience, a recognisable phenomenological situation, by which we can begin to understand the making of language and the desire that motivates it. It is an invitation to think and reflect at the limit, where an act is usually decisive. And what is this structure we find wherein desire is reared in the midst of a ruined landscape? It is that of a room with a conversation in the middle.

By way of further elaboration, let us assess a situation historically specific to art schools, and one that seems comparable in structure. In her book

titled *Hikayatou Jasad* (Story of a Body), Nadia Annamar offers a series of interviews conducted with Lebanese artists and sculptors, all of whom taught or studied at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) and later at the School of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University.⁴ What these artists had in common is a model, a nude woman in the centre of their shared atelier. Her name is Mariam Kheiro. We are told that she worked for some time as the private model for the painter Kaisar Al-Gemayel before acting full time as the first professional nude model at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts when Al-Gemayel was its head. Although unevenly articulated, Annamar's book seeks nevertheless to unearth a hitherto unwritten story about a woman's body repeatedly pictured. Mariam Kheiro's voice, it seems, is yet to be heard. In the interview with the model with which the book opens, Kheiro appears as an elderly and ailing woman, still temperamental, with strong opinions and a marked generosity in remembering the artists of the first and second generation whom she accompanied during the early years of the Académie. Her nostalgia is poignant. Obviously, she is an ageing and forgotten woman who was once at the centre of a nascent art school and whose image was multiplied over the papers and canvases of a growing community of artists. She was once the centre that gave structure to that famed room at the Académie, while the artists had a room with a model at the centre. That is the gist of Annamar's book. It is also possibly a concise description of that pivotal moment in our local history of modernism, namely the founding of ALBA; a moment when the grammar of pictorial arts was presumably set and rehearsed in a room with a model at the centre. Accordingly, the nude body of Mariam Kheiro is proffered as a measure, a standard by which art students are evaluated and towards which they all must tend. Concomitantly, what is usually named style, or in other words, the personal pictorial idiom of each student, is but the visible evidence of a young artist's shortcomings, exasperation, partial solutions and latent desires for that model at the centre of the room. In all of this, the body of Mariam Kheiro remains inexhaustible, a cipher for unrequited approaches, a fixed object of desire on whose shores a million pictures lie awash. 'This ass is not my ass,' she says. Stunned, the student attempts a defence: 'It is not my fault if you are like this.' Mariam replies: 'You are incapable of seeing beauty, this thing is not for you, this ass inspired good artists and by drawing it they all learned art.'⁵

Perhaps this is no more than an anecdote. It tells nothing of that stunned young art student, very little of the interviewee Nkoula Annamar and not enough of Mariam Kheiro. Yet it does provide an image of the insuperable hierarchy on which art schools are founded. Rather than a room with a model at the centre, art schools are in fact structured as a hierarchy, the pinnacle of which is occupied by the conflation of the model with a primer of fixed pictorial grammar. To exceed the pinnacle is to force a miracle and become a singular artist. Yet what the hierarchy provides is the preface to every transgression. And although the hierarchy professes a yearning for the singular artist as liberator, it nevertheless maintains the art school as a solid basic necessity.

In following the logic of this assessment, an art school appears to be ideologically produced. It performs an inversion of relations. It proffers the singular artist as an unbounded subject, a fountain of creativity, vital because transgressive. It does so by positing itself and its curriculum as the contrary, namely an

incomplete proposition, a structure that points at 'genius' but can only provide lessons in the pictorial grammar of yesterday. For the primer of pictorial grammar becomes more antiquated with every transgression of every singular artist. This is an ideological production because it inverts and masks the function of the artist. For is the artist, that singular individual with a proper name, simply and purely a tireless and expansive emitter of ideas? Is the artist truly and simply the other of institutions, the renegade of discourses, a puzzling innovator? Or is the artist a guarantee against the proliferation of signification, what is ironically termed the 'peril which threatens the world?'⁶ In his essay titled, 'What is an Author?', Michel Foucault argues that the author, the proper name—for us it is the artist—fulfils a functional principle by which 'one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and re-composition of fiction'.⁷ Accordingly, one can argue that the author/artist is the figure through which we avoid the often daunting task of looking at an image, of reading a text and assuming the responsibility of interpretation. And so rather than engage with the making of signification, the weaving of fictions, we relegate unto the artist/author, unto that proper name, all the risks involved.

If I choose to deploy Foucault's insight, it is in the hope of questioning the way art schools are dragged into complicity with a project aiming at the containment of signification. And so if we are to imagine an art school without a model at the centre and independent of the figure of the artist, who stands outside it and antecedes it, then we must face and respond to this incumbent fear of the proliferation of meaning. We must search for a reason, or rather a libidinal drive that makes the proliferation of meaning an utter necessity and not a threat. My argument is that if an art school cannot avoid institutionalisation, it is then necessary that it be constantly an institution in crisis: a besieged room with a conversation in the middle. For it is in such a situation of chronic crisis that the proliferation of signification is never a threat. Rather, it is a libidinal drive to disperse the one thing we are probably still capable of, namely the enunciation of words. In such a situation, words are evidence that we are still able to propose otherwise. Words are evidence of our survival and of our likely deaths. For words, when extinguished, leave behind a noticeable emptiness, a dubious silence. An art school with a conversation in the middle is a place for the dispersion of language, for weaving sentences; it is a place for the making of fictions. Its evidence lies in its ability to make the gradual prevalence of silence noticeable and questionable.

Notes:

1. The figure of the 'visiting artist' is a case in point. Especially prevalent in graduate art programmes, the 'visiting artist' is a successful and famous practicing artist whose visit to the studios of graduate students is almost the one event in the calendar that makes a graduate programme worth enrolling in. This is certainly true in my experience at the Claremont Graduate School of Art (1990–92). Although universities in Lebanon do not offer graduate studies in art, the issue is even more relevant there precisely because it is exacerbated. Undergraduate students are often left but with the hope of emigrating to continue their studies abroad and so partake in the calendar of a graduate programme abroad.

2. Howard Singerman develops this idea at length. He writes: 'Yet it is Art, a genuine discovery, and the student is an artist, only through excess and difference [...]', in *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), p. 123.

3. In his often-cited *Lives of the Artists*, Giorgio Vasari (1550–68) lays down a typology of artists' biographies. His chapter on the Florentine painter Giotto is exemplary for his description of a miraculous beginning in Italian painting. For an elaboration of the function of the miracle in an artist's biography see also Kris Ernst and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

4. Nadia Annamar, *Hikayatou Jasad* (Beirut: Dar Annahar, 2001). The Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, most often known under the acronym ALBA, was founded in 1943. Instruction began in the academic year 1944–45 with Alexis Boutros as the first dean.

The School of Fine Arts at the Lebanese University was founded in 1964. Nkoula Annamar, a former student at ALBA (1944–49), became the second dean, following architect Antoine Nahhas.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

6. Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

7. *Ibid.*, p. 119.