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## **Adult Education for Critical Consciousness: Luis Camnitzer and His Art as Critical Public Pedagogy**

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Keywords: adult education for critical consciousness, critical public pedagogy, Luis Camnitzer

**Abstract:** Luis Camnitzer's work exemplifies connections between art and adult education for critical consciousness. Critical public pedagogy serves as this study's theoretical framework. Textual analysis of his work and interviews with Camnitzer and others demonstrate his re-presentation of reality, involving audiences as meaning co-creators. Theory, research and practice implications are explored.

"Art is a dialogical process, and the work is only fully completed as a result of that dialogue" (Camnitzer, 1995/2009, p. 201). Dialogue is a pillar of much adult education literature, exploring critical reflection of learners as they challenge assumptions and alter world perceptions central for raising critical consciousness (Brookfield, 2005; Horton & Freire, 1990). This adult education for critical consciousness promotes transformation in thought and action, changing individual and society (Tisdell, Hanley, & Taylor, 2000). Yet little discussion centers on the role of art as adult education for critical consciousness. The type of "dialogue" art fosters which is central to critical public pedagogy often takes place in the public arena. Art is a unique cultural element using symbols to express values and beliefs, transcending and highlighting social constructs. It communicates even though its message may not be direct. As such, art can be a form of adult education and can thus be used to raise critical consciousness about numerous issues including social justice issues (Brookfield, 2005). Through art and adult education for critical consciousness, one can "overcome passivity" to make the world whole again (Greene, 2007, p. 660). Uruguayan conceptual artist Luis Camnitzer reflects this by using art as a means of engaging people in dialogue with their inner perceptions to challenge assumptions and develop a critical consciousness. In this way, art can become a form of critical public pedagogy.

A growing discussion of arts' role in adult education (Clover & Stalker, 2007; Lawrence, 2005) focuses mostly on adult learners as creators in ongoing identity development (Stuckey, 2009) or as social activists (Clover, 2006; Escueta & Butterwick, 2012; Grace & Wells, 2007). Little consideration is given to artists in the public sphere or their role in enacting a critical public pedagogy (Giroux, 2004a; Wright & Sandlin, 2009). While an emerging body of literature explores art's role in adult education and on public pedagogy (Burdick, Sandlin, & O'Malley, 2013; Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010; Wright & Sandlin, 2009), there is a lack of data-based research specifically examining the connection between art and adult education for critical consciousness. Though he never uses the term "adult education," Camnitzer connects art and adult education for critical consciousness by raising questions about identity, political injustice, perceived reality, and artists' role (Princenthal, 1996). He sees art as a means to gain a critical perspective about often unjust situations (Camnitzer & al, 2002). *The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore the connection between art and adult education for critical consciousness through the works of conceptual artist Luis Camnitzer as a form of critical public pedagogy.*

## **Theoretical Framework and Related Literature**

The theoretical framework of the study is grounded in the critical public pedagogy literature and Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation where he examines the coding and decoding of cultural messages produced by art. Public pedagogy assumes much education (and mis-education) occurs through public venues including media and popular culture; public arts like murals and music; and public spaces like museums (Giroux, 2004b; Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010). Critical public pedagogy draws on critical theory and pedagogy, and the public pedagogy literature (Brookfield, 2005; Freire, 1971/1989). There is power in critical public pedagogy as it can encourage audiences to take a closer look at reality (Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010). Education becomes critical by challenges notions of power and normality

The systems of representation explored by Stuart Hall (1997) are connected to the use of public pedagogy as a means to educate critically. This theory supports communication necessary for meaningful interactions through encoding/decoding. According to Hall (1997), as the audience interacts with the artwork, they decode the message, interpret suggested meaning, and may alter it given their context (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Camnitzer as public artist plays with these interpretations, as evident in his use of humor by juxtaposing conflicting codes and media in his various works. In other words, culture changes because of our interactions with art like Camnitzer's. The element of challenging social structures and unjust power dynamics is essential in both Camnitzer's work and critical public pedagogy.

## **Methodology**

Because it allows for quality data collection, this investigation was a qualitative research study with the primary means of data collection being a series of interviews with Camnitzer on March 17 and May 31, 2011 and textual analysis of his works. Additional data included third-party documents like articles and interviews with museum curators where Camnitzer's art has been displayed. This study largely examined Camnitzer's intentions and perspectives on the purposes of his art. Because the study also dealt with his art as a form of adult education for critical consciousness and thus critical public pedagogy, the focus was on his works' educative component. Analyses of interviews, e-mail communications, and documents were grouped into salient themes and reanalyzed (Merriam, 2002).

## **Findings and conclusions**

The findings of this study indicated that Camnitzer exemplifies the connection between art and adult education for critical consciousness in a number of ways, becoming an example of critical public pedagogy.

### **Art as Dialogue**

Exemplifying Hall's (1997) systems of representation, Camnitzer plays with meanings, encouraging new interpretations of seemingly conflicting texts. Since art is "an operation of creation and use of symbols" (Camnitzer, 1995/2009, p. 203), Camnitzer includes audiences in communication and codification of meaning-making by juxtaposing texts to create new meaning in dialogue. This dialogue refers not to the typical definition in adult education of verbal discussion and new understanding, a hallmark of ideology critique (Brookfield, 2005). It is rather an internal dialogue common in art. Artist and audience render freshness to the artwork which only lives in the individualized experience. Audiences must allow the work to deliver its message and display its total effect (Dufrenne, 1973).

Dialogue is vital for the development of a critical consciousness as well as critical public pedagogy (Brookfield 2005; Mezirow, 2000). At first glance, there is no evidence of traditional dialogue when interacting with art, particularly visual art. Though Camnitzer is unfamiliar with Hall's work, he agrees meaning that is not in individual parts of the artwork but in their relationship with audiences. He encourages people to negotiate interpretations and thus possibly create new meanings that challenge the power dynamics at play. Camnitzer often talks of opening space or allowing individuals to interact with his work so codes are exchanged and meanings formed (1994/2009; 2004/2009; 2009). Thus, dialogue evolves between work, artist and audience. In this dialogue the budding critical consciousness may awaken viewer and artist to a new understanding of power imbalances, and thus may lead to action. Viewers are likely affected by Camnitzer's work (or any artwork) in some way, though it is unclear exactly how, as the purpose of this study was not to analyze audience response but rather the artist's intent and the perceptions of curators and art critics who have discussed his work. But dialogue is still prevalent between all three players in this communication (artist, work, and audience) and can therefore become a medium for adult education for critical consciousness.

### **Art as Adult Education for Critical Consciousness**

Everything can be viewed as art according to Camnitzer who proposes that art can become "a common denominator for understanding" (1969/2009, p. 9; 2009). He sees his art as a variant of pedagogy. Good education and good art foster expression and communication through imagining and posturing, pushing individuals outside conventions. Art grounded in ethics can be militant by challenging the status quo, encouraging viewers to reach their human potential. Yet Camnitzer acknowledges art buried in museum walls has difficulty impacting social change and interacting with art will not necessarily change the status quo but seeds of new awareness are planted through this dialogue.

Through artistic means, Camnitzer presents a space to grapple with things "unthinkable and inaccessible with the use of nonartistic tools" (Camnitzer & Hickey, 2003/2009, p.81). Art becomes a way to communicate and solve problems by encouraging critical thinking. It reveals cultural gaps artists try to work in to shape culture. Camnitzer believes art has the ability to transform thought and perception, partly because it has inherently embodied ideological resistance (Ramírez, 1990). Art is not separate from politics and vice versa. Politics must be creative ("aesthetified politics") and art must be socially effective ("politicized aesthetics") (Camnitzer, 1994/2009, p. 63).

When Camnitzer uses words and images, he hopes to explore that borderland space where new understandings take place. By empowering the viewer to understand anew, the work can become a way to raise a critical consciousness, one of the explicit purposes of critical adult education (Brookfield, 2005). Camnitzer's work contributes to discourses on adult education, opening space for dialogue, interaction and potential ideology critique. Though Camnitzer acknowledges that art alone cannot transform culture, he believes art has the power to help audiences construct society in subversive ways. Artists must work against commonly shared assumptions to create works fostering criticality. Camnitzer believes artists are constructive niggers helping audiences find alternatives. His role as a cultural worker is to shape social conscience "ethically, politically and artistically (in that order of priorities), politics is the strategy and art is the tool" (Camnitzer, E-mail Interview, May 31, 2011).

### **Camnitzer as Critical Public Pedagogue**

While Camnitzer does not use the term “critical public pedagogy,” he embraces its fundamental notions. Camnitzer mixes images and languages in what he calls “a pedagogical expression” (Camnitzer, 1983/2009, p. 28). In this way he hopes to promote his audience’s critical view of their perceived realities. Though he does not use his art as purely didactic, Camnitzer feels he becomes “a lens that helps understand the kaleidoscope that makes the community” (2004/2009, p. 84). Viewers construct their own storyline based on the juxtaposition of words and images to revisit earlier understandings. Camnitzer's art requires “active participation in the production of the meaning of the piece” (Ramírez, 1990, p. 5), an extension of his analysis of power.

Camnitzer’s work encourages interaction and critique of ideas and social conditions. He hopes his art will help re-present reality in ways unexpected by viewers. Camnitzer’s *Uruguayan Torture Series* (1983-1984) exemplifies his distorting messages to develop critical consciousness as he uses various images of torture with text encoded in positive messages. Camnitzer juxtaposes the disturbing visual image with a common phrase denoting that actions are not common (as the underlying statement may suggest) but rather inhumane. This written message with the negative image creates space of potential dialogue in the audience’s mind, what Hall (1997) refers to as coding and decoding. By often using printed language along with visual images, Camnitzer attempts to break down previous assumptions and definitions to gain depth in understanding. It also promotes exploration of the relation between art and politics, and art as a communicator and mediator of culture. He uses a variety of media to challenge the status quo while also involving the audience as co-creators of meaning. It is in this role that the audience awakens to a social responsibility that was drowned out by the conventionalities of the structures and expectations of interaction with art in public. These are hallmarks of adult education for critical consciousness, making Camnitzer a critical public pedagogue of sorts.

### **Implications**

While this study was limited to the analysis of this one artist, it has implications for critical public pedagogy theory and practical ones for arts-based learning and adult education, as Camnitzer argues that a form of education occurs in public settings. Camnitzer supports aspects of critical public pedagogy, as explained earlier. Like other artistic work, Camnitzer’s art offers a space where interaction with the work allows deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings in ways that challenge assumptions and welcome critical perceptions. Art’s communicative element makes possible the connection between art and critical public pedagogy because to a large extent public pedagogy begets informal learning. Because the dialogue is informal and often covert, it is unclear what kind of dialogue exists (verbal or mental) and to what extent this dialogue unfolds. The presentation will make this more evident by engaging in dialogue about the findings in writing but doing so in tandem with presenting some of Camnitzer’s visual art.

This study affirmed Camnitzer’s belief that the arts are a means to learn and encourage critical questioning. He discusses theoretical ideas of arts-based learning, since arts reach learning missed by the rationalistic duality of Western education. Camnitzer sees his art as a form of (nontraditional) education, requiring interactions (often internal ones) where works communicate with viewers in the offered space and where new ideas can question status quo. Camnitzer, like other cultural critics, sees education as the practice of incorporating lived interactions beyond institutional settings and social knowledge construction. Preferring art not overtly activist, Camnitzer hopes viewers step into critiquing spaces and create new meanings and understandings of perceived reality.

Summarizing his goal and also this study's hypothesis, Camnitzer believes art aims to develop creativity in individuals hoping to create a critical consciousness that ultimately may improve society. Art for Camnitzer is more than a discipline but rather a method to potentially resist learned perceptions. The themes of this study support the notion that art can be a tool to communicate and to educate in such a way that a critical consciousness can rise in the mind of the individual interacting with the work (whether as artist or as audience). "So, art is a form of education and education is a form of art" (Camnitzer, E-mail Interview, March 17, 2011).

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