


Unravelling Art Practice and Education Entanglements in Academia: An Interview with Marco Buti

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Introduction

Marco Buti is a visual artist and academic professor known for his rigorous exploration of various mediums, including printmaking, drawing, and photography. He is also recognized for his contributions to art education and his critical reflections on artistic practice and its teaching in academic settings. Born in Empoli, Italy, in 1953, Buti moved to Brazil in 1962, where his artistic and educational work has played a significant role in the development of the visual arts. He has published several books and exhibited his artwork in numerous solo and group exhibitions internationally. In 1997, he received the Printmaking Prize from the São Paulo Association of Art Critics (APCA), and in 1999, he was awarded the Internazionale di Biella per l'Incisione prize in Biella, Italy. Buti taught printmaking and drawing at the State University of Campinas from 1986 to 1995. Since 1996, he has been a professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the School of Communications and Arts at the University of São Paulo, where he served as department head from 2002 to 2007. This interview was conducted online in December 2024.

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Marcelo Schellini (MS): The word “university” seems to denote a sense of universal access to knowledge, an idea of totality that presupposes the establishment of a physical place—an institution that aims to encompass multiple fields of knowledge and disciplines. Nowadays, the teaching of the arts is present in major universities around the world. Based on your experience, how was the teaching of the arts integrated into the university? How do you perceive the coexistence of art with other fields of knowledge in academic institutions?

Marco Buti (MB): Was it ever integrated? Or rather, teaching was introduced, but not art. The Academy of Fine Arts, despite its many issues, had art at its core; teaching was structured with its peculiarities in mind by connoisseurs who understood them. At the university, there was an adaptation—often clumsy—to the scientifically accepted principles, following general academic norms devised by people uninformed about art. If scientific frameworks can impose restrictions on the humanities, then, what can be said about the restrictions to art?

To make it clear: I am only referring to the institutional difficulty of acknowledging the attempt to create an “artistic work”; not to Art Theory, Art Criticism, or Art History. Nothing makes sense without this fundamental attempt, which has no guarantee, justification, or methodology applicable as a general norm.

On the other hand, a major achievement has been the acceptance of the art practice as modalities of master's and doctorate degree, though not without internal opposition and a persistent tendency toward bureaucratization, such as the application of methodologies and the requirement of an academic text, doubling the workload, as if art did not have autonomy as a form of knowledge.

(MS): According to Nikolaus Pevsner (2014), the modern idea of an art school began in the Western tradition in the 16th century. He describes how the Renaissance *Accademia del Disegno* was gradually developed throughout the centuries, altering its original character through systematization or even academization during the Enlightenment. Certainly, much has changed from this historical period to the present day. Even so, to what extent does history influence the current situation of the arts in the university?

(MB): The foundation of the *Accademia del Disegno* reflects the desire for a more intellectualized education for artists, who had managed to separate themselves from craftsmen, aiming to ascend to the liberal arts. European society at the time was composed of a vast majority of illiterate people, and knowledge recognized as intellectual could only take as its model the literate culture of the exclusive elites. The material operations essential to the Visual Arts revealed their artisanal heritage. It is remarkable to see how artists

themselves strove to bring their activities closer to theory, which was always more prestigious. ‘La pittura è cosa mentale’ might have been its most famous expression.

The legacy of the *Accademia del Disegno* is also a History of Art focused on the Major Arts—mainly Painting and Sculpture, while Architecture has its own school—and the concept of exhibition space which is reduced to galleries and museums. Reproducible and circulating works are barely recognized or treated at the same level, except in a few printmaking and photography courses that do not follow conventional standards.

This continues at the University. The legacy of the *Accademia del Disegno*, an institution that people try to escape from, at least in discourse, merges with the adaptation to the scientific standards I have already mentioned. It is very difficult to treat Practice/Theory as a single body of knowledge without hierarchies. The established idea that Theory precedes and underpins Practice is totally false and disproven by artistic achievement. There is no fixed way or model of working with art.

In addition to historical influence, there is the influence of contemporary hegemonic art and its Major Arts, increasingly directed towards entertainment and the hegemonic marketplace. It is not the role of the University, especially public institutions, to simply repeat what is established in the art circuit and structure its studies and courses according to the predominant models. A critical attitude must be maintained, seeking the autonomy of thought for both educators and students during their formative years.

(MS): What would be the specific knowledge of art? What is the research in art about?

(MB): Considering the difficult definition of art, what would be its specific knowledge? Perhaps the ability to create a poetic meaning through the directed organization of actions, materials, and techniques, that is, drawing. Without forgetting the accident and the improvisation. Involving everything from the most accentuated and heavy materiality to the body itself, down to a minimal approach, where materials and techniques are indistinguishable from those used in writing: paper, pen, pencil, computer, and cell phone. But none of this is empirically provable, nor would it make sense to be repeated by others, producing the same results, as is expected and required in the scientific method. Whereas I believe that art research is art itself, skewing the inapplicable notion of ‘object of study’.

(MS): Practice seems to be essential for the creative process, as well as for the teaching of art. However, the academic setting overestimates theoretical production. Is there a fracture between practice and theory, between the hand and the mind? Could the separation between the manual and the intellectual be what possibly leads to the lesser appreciation of art in academia?

(MB): I see that I have already begun to answer this question in previous responses. Perhaps it is the central issue. It has distant roots—aristocratic, in my opinion. Manual labor has always been despised, assigned to enslaved people and, at most, artisans. The University began by continuing the tradition of the *Trivium* and *Quadrivium*, inherited from classical Western antiquity. These were the Liberal Arts, based on words and numbers, generating knowledge that would make a person free, in contrast to material servitude, which was seen as an inevitable attribute of the so-called Mechanical Arts.

I feel this is still very present in the University today, to the point of discomfort—visible in body language—on the rare occasions when a purely theoretical professor steps into a studio class or workshop. There is when it is conspicuous the enormous unawareness regarding the techniques essential to carrying out certain artistic work. One can only truly understand the role of techniques when faced with the concrete and personal challenge of their execution. Everything is used in pursuit of this aspiration, and it serves only that purpose: technique becomes poetic language when applied with the necessary precision. It ceases to be what was once considered the Mechanical Arts—knowledge that is also absolutely essential to human life and deserves respect.

(MS): In general, academic settings seem to legitimize and favor certain formats. For example, a peer-reviewed article will carry more weight in the evaluation of an educator’s key performance indicator than an exhibition, a musical concert, or an art performance (Schellini et al., , 2023). As Larrosa (2003) pointed out, the dominance of the positivist scientific format has led to the decline of other forms of writing, such as moral epistles, philosophical dialogues, confessions, essays, and other genres. How does this issue impact research in the arts?

(MB): This issue also relates to the previous ones. Everything is conceived based on scientific frameworks and technology, which, let’s not forget, are more directly tied to commercial profit and commodification, along with economics. In the neoliberal decades, this tendency intensified, increasingly infiltrating public universities—with the approval of many academic fields. Artistic work tends to be undervalued compared to publications, lectures, and courses. Key performance indicators—essentially just accounting—are applied in an attempt to assess quality. The impossible task of evaluating each artistic work in person is replaced by the absurd.

The fact is that, with some exceptions, which certainly exist, scientists are generally ignorant of the arts, and vice versa. However, the dominant standard is scientific, and it is widely believed that the scientific method has universal applicability—something I once heard a vice-rector claim. As a result, the arts are expected to conform to a way of thinking that does not truly accommodate them. What surprises me most, however, is the docility of most artists in academia, who accept these inadequate parameters without proposing possible solutions derived from artistic knowledge.

This issue affects research in the arts by transforming into “research” that would simply be art—demanding in its own right and not necessarily dependent on methodologies or justifications to fulfill its poetic purpose. Once again, while there are many exceptions, the appearance of research may end up masking feeble

artistic work—perhaps from future art educators—who may struggle to contribute to the meaningful integration of art into the universities.

(MS): How does the issue of text versus image come into play here? In visual arts research, can we speak of the autonomy of the image?

(MB): We must talk about the autonomy of the image, but I wouldn't place the image and the text in opposition. First, literature and poetry are also forms of art and often face similar challenges in academic courses, where theory also predominates. No artistic discipline would have standard procedures unless they are externally imposed, as in the Academy of Fine Arts. There is no fixed model of an artist, conceptions of art are neither clear-cut nor absolute, and no universally accepted definition exists.

I believe the wisest approach would be to respect each artist's individual path, which I see as a right. Imposing fixed forms encourages mediocrity and facilitates its acceptance within academia. A great number of artists work with both image and text simultaneously. Perhaps the most famous example is Leonardo da Vinci, but it would be absurd to demand that everyone express themselves in the same way. Some start with projects, others do not distinguish between a project or sketch and the final work, some write after completing the work, while others derive the project from a series of aimless attempts. To impose a fixed approach would be to fall into the worst kind of academicism.

The absence of text should not necessarily be seen as laziness or incapacity—it can be a precise and demanding artistic choice, where silence is judged to be more meaningful. The real problems arise from the imposition of pre-established text formats, which are often absurd when applied to Visual Arts. It would be far better to leave things open-ended—ranging from entirely visual works to works accompanied by texts in the most appropriate form for each case, or even fully theoretical works by artists, in which case academic norms should indeed be respected.

(MS): What could be a possible solution for the revaluation of art education in the university?

(MB): I consider a decisive change to be very difficult. Usually, there is only one school dedicated to the arts within the vast scientific structure of the university. If there is a solution, it would need to come from the highest levels of the university hierarchy, but it should originate within the departments and schools of art—starting with a consensus that does not currently exist. As far as I know, there has never been a serious discussion at the highest hierarchical levels about the presence of art in the university.

It must also be said that there has been little interest even within the arts departments themselves. It is virtually impossible to carry out such a discussion amid increasing bureaucratic demands without compromising students' education.

My position is part of a minority disagreement, but it became clear in every academic selection process I participated in. We should not wait for official changes to act as artists within academic settings. What surprises me is the lack of initiative in presenting art in a way that respects its nature within academia—because it is possible. Since the 1970s, the University of São Paulo has experienced master's and doctoral degrees, as well as professorships, granted outside traditional academic standards, and approved by examining committees. This shows that permanent disagreements exist. Why aren't they more sizable?

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