

## Reading through art for the worlds to come. A pedagogical take on the ever-present (and ever-pressing) question what can art do?

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Art education seems to be ubiquitous lately. Creativity, innovation, and multiple intelligences are generally celebrated concepts. It is almost politically incorrect to conceive of a curriculum, in any field whatsoever, that lacks a minimum amount of ‘artistic’ exposure. Some even argue that the now old STEM focus for education (science, technology, engineering, math) should mutate into a more up-to-date and fashionable STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, math). And yet, all this art-ed euphoria coexists with an increasingly present threat against the arts and the humanities as disciplines. Budget cuts, entire departments merging or disappearing, and young unemployed professionals are visible outcomes of the paradox that arises when a society argues that art should be present in every field, if only there were some means to fund it.

To talk about the importance of the arts and the humanities for education, community building, or democracy is not, in any way, a novel approach to human development. It is a return to the very old notion of civic humanities that engages with and through art as a mean of ‘better’ being together. In that spirit, and in dialogue with both the belief in the impact of art education and the risk of ceasing to be a relevant field for contemporary societies, the Cultural Agents Initiative at Harvard University has developed Pre-Texts, an innovative methodology for teaching languages and literatures through hands-on engagement with art (see [pre-texts.org](http://pre-texts.org)).

The hands-on approach also offers the added value of making immediate sense of what might otherwise remain abstract theoretical concepts. In the lines that follow, I’ll engage several challenging theoretical notions developed by contemporary French theorists<sup>1</sup> to argue that art<sup>2</sup> (making, appreciation, thinking, exposure, and engagement with) grounds theory in concrete experience. I’ll give especial attention to the meaning and importance of aesthetics, as understood by Jacques Rancière; politics, as seen by Etienne Balibar and Jean-Luc Nancy; and neurosciences (mainly brain plasticity) as proposed by Catherine Malabou. By discussing these theoretical notions, I attempt to argue that art is hardly a luxury of prosperous societies, as it is sometimes framed on the cutting tables of budget committees. Rather, it is a ‘practice’ that lies at the very core of commu-

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<sup>1</sup> Namely Jacques Rancière, Jean-Luc Nancy, Etienne Balibar, and Catherine Malabou.

<sup>2</sup> I propose to understand art in a wide (yet not unlimited) sense: as a human activity that creates objects, relations, and experiences, while appealing to the senses and affecting the ways in which we perceive and connect with the world.

nity building, sense making, and emancipation— one that we can't (and should not) live without.

### **Pre-Texts' basics**

Pre-Texts is a methodology for teaching language and literature that draws from a number of creative practices, mainly from Latin America: cartoneras publishing houses, Brazilian *Literatura de cordel*, Forum Theater, readers in tobacco factories, etc.. The combination of these home-grown practices develops avid, critical, readers and active citizens by using classic literature as an incentive for making art.

The approach is very simple and user friendly. You choose a fragment of a text (any text whatsoever, although we cheer for classical literature) and present students with a creative challenge to re-work the literature by making a piece of art. Any art form would do the work. Be it dancing, painting, sculpting, photographing, singing, writing, cooking, performing... You invite participants to create an addition to, or variation on, the chosen text. In this way, literature ceases to be a sacred, unattainable object and becomes a stimulus (a pretext) to make new forms of art, to play, and have fun.

By doing so, the traditional order of learning is inverted. Instead of starting with often boring vocabulary lists and grammar concepts, and moving from there to literal understanding, then to interpretation, and finally (though usually there is no time to get to this point) to creativity, Pre-Texts starts with creation. And to create an addition to or a variation on a given text, you need to cover its interpretation, understanding, grammar and vocabulary.

A couple of things are required to guarantee the success of any Pre-Text implementation. First and foremost, you have to keep expectations high, and believe in the inventive abilities of your students. More often than not, they will meet and exceed such expectations. You need to provide them with spaces of emancipation (à la Rancière) and allow them to fruitfully redistribute the sensible—to rearrange signs and spaces, and build new meanings with them. You'd be surprised to see how much sense they make of a text, and how different it is from *your* sense (or the one that you had in mind). You'd also note how effectively engaging with and through art develops admiration, strengthens *rappports*, and reduces violent responses to conflicts.

But first things first. Pre-Texts is a teaching methodology and, as such, a teacher must be involved. There is only one demand: that the teacher be a *maître ignorant*, an ignorant schoolmaster.

### **Emancipate through art education**

Jacques Rancière's *Le Maître Ignorant* is a beautiful account of Joseph Jacotot's teaching experience in the Netherlands—an experience that, without purposefully aiming at doing so, shaped the premises of emancipation through education. For starters, one must forget:

ce que croient tous les professeurs consciencieux : que la grande affaire du maître est de transmettre ses connaissances à ses élèves pour les élever par degrés vers sa propre science. Il (Jacotot) savait qu'il ne s'agit point de gaver les élèves de connaissances et de les faire répéter comme des perroquets, mais aussi qu'il faut leur éviter ces chemins de hasard où se perdent des esprits encore incapables de distinguer l'essentiel de l'accessoire et le principe de la conséquence. Bref, l'acte essentiel du maître était d'expliquer [...] (9)<sup>3</sup>.

Pre-Texts is all about overcoming this hierarchy. The teacher becomes another (active) participant. There should always be someone who facilitates the explorations and detours; however, this is not the teacher's exclusive responsibility, but a shared one with students, and guests. Because facilitating the detours does not mean avoiding the haphazard paths, explaining, or inviting students to see what's essential. Rather, facilitating a Pre-Text session demands fostering all those possible paths, noticing the essential in the apparently accessory remarks and reclaiming the fun of failure. If one is to find the serious engagement with art making, one must lose the fear of failure. The creation and experiencing of new paths and explanations doesn't occur if risks are not taken. And to take risks in a committed way, requires a different relationship with failure from the one that weighs down most of our educational systems.

Consequently, the *maître ignorant* does not see him or herself as someone who delivers an explanation. Defending the explanatory task immediately fixes hierarchies insofar as he who explains becomes the only judge of the explanation. This act of authority, of course, does not necessarily follow from a teacher's malicious intentions. Rather, it may result from a teaching approach that offers too much solicitous support and tends to be paternalistic, univocal, and unidirectional.

With Pre-Texts, teachers become active participants in the learning process much in the same way as Rancière's emancipated spectator would take part in the sense-making of a given work of art<sup>4</sup>. In doing so, all the intelligences in the room, brought together by a text and engaged in an artistic practice, are placed at the same level, avoiding what Rancière's calls the *abrutissement*, or dumbing-down of the public. Presented as the opposite of emancipation, *abrutissement* is the phenomenon that occurs when one

<sup>3</sup> "What all conscientious professor believe: that the important business of the master is to transmit his knowledge to his students so as to bring them, by degrees, to his own level of expertise. Like all conscientious professors, he knew that teaching was not in the slightest about cramming students with knowledge and having them repeat it like parrots, but he knew equally well that students had to avoid the chance detours where minds still incapable of distinguishing the essential from the accessory, the principle from the consequence, get lost. In short, the essential act of the master was to explicate" (3, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, translated by Kristin Ross).

<sup>4</sup> In "The emancipated spectator" Rancière states: "What is required is a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs" (4). Etienne Balibar would continue this same train of thought to propose that there is no such thing as a possible outside or inside of a work of art. See David, Catherine, and Jean-Francois Chevreir. *Documenta X: The Book*. Hatje Cantz Publishers, 1997.

intelligence is subordinated to another (25). Being emancipated is thus being aware of the power and potentiality of the human spirit. It is, in a way, subscribing to what humanism holds most dear, and implies keeping expectations high and believing in the inventive abilities of humankind. To teach, as seen by Jacotot, Rancière, and Pre-Texts, is not a matter of instruction but one of emancipation (Gramsci, also, distinguished between instruction and education.) An emancipated student is one who wishes (and not who is capable of, for all of them are) to build one's own paths, relations, *rappports*, and *renvois*. It is a student who wants and risks creating a particular sense of the world (of the text) and is willing to defend it among other possible senses that arise within a community.

The will is crucial here. Emancipation doesn't require a master (in the traditional sense, as someone who provides an explanation to emancipate oneself). What it does need, no exceptions, is the desire to be emancipated, to find and construct new paths. In this exploration, art is a critical asset. Especially, because once you get into it, the fun of art sustains the exploration. When teaching *happens* through art-making, the pupil ceases to be a passive receptor of information. He learns to observe, select, compare, identify and build relations<sup>5</sup>. It is during these processes that emancipation is possible.

Pre-Texts creates an environment where students, by themselves or in groups, produce a work of art critically interpreting a literary piece. The multiple and likely dissimilar results that arise in each classroom will allow students (and teachers) to acknowledge and admire their peers' skills and ideas, and compare them with their own. Such variety, as well as the possibility of actively seeing, contrasting and being involved in the creative processes, exposes the group to a basic principle proposed by Rancière,

Il y a inégalité dans les manifestations de l'intelligence, selon l'énergie plus ou moins grande que la volonté communique à l'intelligence pour découvrir et combiner des rapports nouveaux, mais il n'ya pas de hiérarchie de capacité intellectuelle. C'est la prise de conscience de cette égalité de nature qui s'appelle émancipation et qui ouvre la voie de toute aventure au pays du savoir (48)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Speaking about art and the emancipated spectator Rancière adds, "Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her [...]" (13).

<sup>6</sup> "There is inequality in the manifestations of intelligence according to the greater or lesser energy communicated to the intelligence by the will for discovering and combining new relations; but there is no hierarchy of intellectual capacity. Emancipation is becoming conscious of this equality of nature. This is what opens the way to all adventure in the land of knowledge" (27, Op. Cit. 3).

As a consequence, the number of potential interpretations of the world (or of the literary text in our case) is never-ending. An education that aims at being emancipatory must (in the same way as emancipated or emancipating art does,) renounce the authority of the imposed and unique message (*Art of the Possible*: 258). As Rancière states, "the idea of emancipation implies that there are never places that impose their law, that there are always several spaces in a space, several ways of occupying it, and each time the trick is knowing what sort of capacities one is setting in motion, what sort of world one is constructing" (262). This is why there are no wrong answers/interpretations in Pre-Texts, as long as the interpreter can explain how particular elements of the text were used. Each piece of art that is made in a workshop stands as a possible reading, as a fruitful engagement with the text.

Evidently, this isn't a risk free approach. When you foster emancipation you may be entering an uncertain or even hazardous zone, as a consequence of abandoning the security that a single meaning provides. For emancipation is also a political and ethical choice: to reveal to students the fact that they have the power to make sense of the world in their own terms implies accepting the possibility of having an uncontrollable multiplicity of worlds and meanings. Such a concession also implies acknowledging the legitimate existence of meanings that we don't like, with which we do not agree, and some that might even scare us. In practice, however, those possible fears are significantly contained by the collective, cooperative, spirit of mutual admiration that the workshop builds.

### **Redistribute the Sensible**

Each way of occupying the world, of making sense of it, poses its very own distribution of the sensible. Let us remember that this distribution is what determines (and makes possible) relationships within a given community, including their politics of inclusion and exclusion, mainly through visibility. As defined by Rancière, the distribution of the sensible is

[...] ce système d'évidences sensibles qui donne à voir en même temps l'existence d'un commun et les découpages qui y définissent les places et les parts respectives. Un partage du sensible fixe donc en même temps un commun partagé et des parts exclusives. Cette répartition des parts et des places se fonde sur un partage des espaces, des temps et de formes d'activité qui détermine la manière même dont un commun se prête à participation et dont les uns et les autres ont part à ce partage (12)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> "[...] the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution" (12, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, translated by Gabriel Rockhill).

Art and education, insofar as they contribute to the creation of meaning by the construction of fictions (that is, rearrangements of signs, images, and the relationships with and between them) are effective ways of altering particular distributions. However, one must bear in mind that neither for Rancière nor for Pre-Texts is there an ultimate (or even desired) distribution of the sensible. The goal is not teleological—if it were, it would consist of a mere act of deferring the desire of a univocal approach to sense making, and interpretation.

Instead, the power that Pre-Texts sees in reading through and with art lays in the very fact that such a practice fosters *dissensus*, by inviting students to continuously redistribute their environment and their links with it. Literature is a potent way of doing so, because

[...] la littérature intervient en tant que littérature dans ce découpage des espaces et des temps, du visible et de l'invisible, de la parole et du bruit. Elle intervient dans ce rapport entre des pratiques, des formes de visibilité et des modes du dire qui découpe un ou des mondes communs (12)<sup>8</sup>.

Dissensus is thus not only a way of resistance. It is an attitude towards the world that modifies the coordinates of the sensible, while reconstructing and representing the relationships between places, identities, beings, communities, etc. Perhaps, one of the most effective ways of risking those new configurations is through art and play. The freedom of the Pre-Texts methodology consist of its willingness to accept any type of connection between one art form and the other, or between two different interpretations of a text. And the responsibility that Pre-Texts requires is to anchor the new artwork in a close-reading of the primary text. By using art to approach literature, students discover and create new ways of presenting objects and organizing spaces and ideas. Artistic creativity needs dissensus as much as political creativity does. Without it, we are doomed to a very boring and literal (to say the least) world of repetitions.

### **Using art to make sense**

It is not hard to find a traumatic experience involving an amateur reader and a classical literary text. Frequently, good works of art don't make sense right away. They demand an effort, an active engagement of the spectator/reader in order to find a *meaning*. Mostly because there is no such thing as a pre-existent, essential, everlasting meaning to grasp. To make sense of a work of art (and to make sense of the word) you actually need to *produce* its meaning. But how?

This is where Jean-Luc Nancy's ideas prove to be most relevant. According to Nancy (the relationship here with Rancière's *maître ignorant* is quite clear) the world is not a fixed 'object' you're able to access or un-

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<sup>8</sup> "[...] literature intervenes as literature in this carving up of space and time, the visible and the invisible, speech and noise. It intervenes in the relationship between practices and forms of visibility and modes of saying that carves up one or more common worlds" (4, *The Politics of Literature*, translated by Julie Rose).

derstand. Meaning is always in the process of being produced through connections, relations and contacts. *Sense* is more an act of creation than one of comprehension:

Le sens (du fait que le monde est) c'est du sens au sens le plus fort et le plus actif du terme : non pas une signification donnée (comme celle d'un Dieu créateur ou celle d'une humanité achevée), mais le sens, absolument, comme possibilité de renvoi d'un pont à un autre, d'un émetteur à un récepteur et d'un élément à un autre élément, renvoi qui forme conjointement une direction, une adresse, et une valeur ou une tenue de sens. Cette tenue fait le tenue d'un monde : son *ethos* ou son *habitus*. Bien évidemment, ni le sens comme direction, ni le sens comme tenue ne sont donnés. Ils sont chaque fois à inventer : autant dire à créer, c'est-à-dire à faire surgir du rien et à faire surgir comme ce rien-de-raison qui soutient, qui conduit et qui forme les énoncés véritablement créateurs de sens, qui sont ceux de la science, de la poésie, de la philosophie, de la politique, de l'esthétique et de l'éthique (57-58)<sup>9</sup>.

Of course, and Nancy warns us, this doesn't mean that anything anyhow makes sense. However, it does imply an infinite possibility of sense-making, which justifies the importance of dissensus. What a Pre-Texts session puts forward is the fact that reading is a creative way of engaging with a work of art (which is, first and foremost, a series of signs connected in an attempt to *produce* sense), a way of establishing relations, of creating affects. It is an invitation to approach the text in a critical fashion, asking questions, daring to propose new links. Art, Nancy tells us, creates a symbolization of the world. But it is just one of multiple possible symbolizations, since no sense is guaranteed or previously extant.

Pre-Texts makes dissensus, understood as the coexistence of ever changing meanings of the world, visible. It also makes students aware of the fact that they inhabit a particular community where sense has been produced and it shows them that such a sense can be questioned, modified, *mis en jeu*. Experiencing that there is a distribution of the sensible in place, and that it is within that given distribution that one can act, opens up a huge space for (re)thinking how we define our communities and our sense of belonging.

I am not saying here that teaching literature through art would magically solve the very difficult contemporary problems of social or economic exclusion and inclusion. What I'm trying to propose is that, when you open a space for creative reading in a classroom setting, you render sense-

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<sup>9</sup> Sense (about the fact that the world is) is sense in its strongest and most active sense: not a given signification (like that of an almighty God or a realized human kind), but rather sense, altogether, as the possibility of a renvoi from one point to another, from a sender to a receiver, and from one element to another. Such a renvoi creates, jointly, a direction, a dexterity, a value or a tenure of sense. This tenure builds the holdings of one world: its *ethos* and its *habitus*. Evidently, neither sense as direction nor sense as tenure are givens. They are both to be invented every time--that is to say, to be created, to appear from nothing and to appear as this nothing-of-reason that supports, conducts, and forms utterances that truly create sense. Those are the utterances of science, poetry, philosophy, politics, aesthetics, and ethics (My translation).

making dialectical and you allow students to appreciate the process of its *becoming*. Part of being in a community is sharing certain *meanings* that directly affect the ways in which we relate to others and ourselves.

Pre-Texts fosters an environment where the process of sense making is shown precisely as that, a process. One where students are able to fail, play, question, compare, contrast, and link; where they are allowed to set the world in motion to come up with answers and *readings* that affect both the work of art and their relationship with it. You can easily do that as a student with a literary text. Our hopes are that you will also be able to do so, as a citizen, with the world.

### **Using art to build communities (and to reduce violence)**

Using the classroom setting to reveal that meaning is a process rather than an object or a fact has deep consequences in terms of community building and collective dynamics. As we have already mentioned, belonging to a group implies sharing a number of beliefs, values and principles that are used to organize, approach, and construct the world we inhabit. Realizing that there is nothing immanent supporting the pillars of our societies might help us in our attempts to render conflict dialectical, to appreciate the precariousness of social constructions, and thereby to reduce violent responses to difference.

Etienne Balibar, concerned by these matters, rereads Lacan to extract three key concepts and think about contemporary communities. First, there is the *réel*, which comprises phenomena such as the economy and globalization. Secondly, we have the *imaginaire* that has to do with the identifications advanced by the media, or by a pervasive 'light or pop culture.' According to Balibar, the imaginary is the projection of the self onto the other in fascination and disgust. It is not, however, the benchmark for the definition of subjectivity. What Balibar and Lacan see as pivotal for the definition of the subject belongs to a third and distinct order: the *symbolique*. It is in the symbolic where the 'differences of civilization' are produced and perpetuated. It is there where communities formulate their most powerful and deep beliefs: what's a woman, a child, what is a 'normal' behavior, what's the relation between life and death, etc. Our belonging to a particular symbolic order defines what unbearably shocks us (*ce qui nous indigné*), which metaphysical questions do we pose and how do we respond to them. It is precisely the solid foundation of the symbolic that turns the differences of civilization into legitimate motives to resort to violence. Often, violence is a reaction to a difference in meaning, to conflicting answers to a single question.

With this distinction Balibar is not denying the importance of the imaginary, which he explains as follows,

[...] what I call a trait of culture designates the existence of community: it is that which makes individuals into a group and, subjectively, that which makes them identify to a greater or lesser degree with a sense of group belonging, through common stereotypes. But the raw material of

this belonging is heterogeneous, built up of beliefs, interests, all the ways in which people represent a shared history; symbols, rituals, customs, popular arts and traditions. In general all these things are experienced as spontaneous, but in practice one realizes that to a large degree they are actually constructed and they evolve over time.

However, when it comes to thinking about violence he sees 'traits of civilization' as more relevant. In part, because those traits are not 'community-exclusive' (meaning that they can be shared by a number of communities—'the west', i.e.), and harder to change and reconfigure. Both traits (culture and civilization) are critical for community building. The difference, as seen by Balibar, is that only the later ones need art to endure (and to change).

But how does a methodology for teaching languages and literatures relate to these very transcendent dilemmas? What does Pre-Texts have to do with Lacan or Balibar or with the explosive conflicts that occur in the name of various traits of civilization? Perhaps the answer to this question depends on how much of a straightforward reply are you eager to receive.

If you favor clear-cut, absolute replies, you might tend to see no possible relation. Pre-Texts would then appear as a small effort in the face of major problems. No doubt this is so, if one values messianic, definite or large-scale solutions. On the other hand, if you are inclined to more nuanced explanations—which are, by no-means, absolute—you might see an important value in Pre-Texts. Important insofar as it impacts the micro-level, a community of individuals brought together by a text and kept together through art. Pre-Texts, as I've tried to show, builds stronger, non-violent communities because it is a methodology that encourages and appreciates dissensus, while engaging in sense-making.

Pre-Texts proposes to *make sense* and create *meaning* through art. There is no novelty in that. The Cultural Agents Initiative is not coming up with anything revolutionary on this account. On the contrary, it is using a very common and ancient approach—one employed by (perhaps) every civilization throughout history: when faced with difficult questions, proceed with caution and resort to art<sup>10</sup>.

Art, as I have been saying, has a pivotal place in the construction of meaning and thus is critical for the consolidation of both the symbolic, and the imaginary orders. But art also comes in handy when one is seeking to overcome the dichotomies that normalize our societies and are at the core of problems of violence and exclusion, for instance. It is this dual function of art, both as a tool of consolidation and of disruption, that has led theorists such as Balibar to argue that there is a decisive difference between artistic and cultural manifestations. Art would then be the ensemble of ideas, practices, or objects that help us to resist the established dichotomies. Culture, from this perspective, would also include ideas,

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<sup>10</sup> Again, I'm using art here in the broadest sense of the term. The one that allow us to see, for instance, the discursive systems of religions as a manifestation of a narrative (and many times visual as well) form of art.

practices, or objects, but with the difference that this group of 'manifestations' would appear as the confirmation of the traditional/dominant/customary order. In Lacanian terms, culture would be connected to the *imaginaire*; art, tied to the *symbolique*.

Whether one agrees or not with this distinction, something seems apparent: differentiating art from culture immediately sets a hierarchy between the two (with art at the top, needless to say). And as we have seen, to believe in hierarchies one needs to believe in essences, or at least be prone to belief in them. You can very well question meaning through aesthetic means, but you can also confirm pre-existent values in the same way. What turns out to be relevant is realizing that, in both cases, the creative act (be it art or culture) is a semantic process and, as such, one with the possibility to invent, strengthen, rebuild, or destroy communities.

The individual links that build the networks of rapports that constitute a community are seldom natural. Art (and culture, if one wishes to continue with this distinction) is one of the many ways in which those links are created and perpetuated, but it is never the only one. The same role can be assigned to Politics, Religion, History, or Violence, to name only a few discursive regimes. What they all share in common is the fact that they can both tie and undo ties in potent, effective, and lasting ways.

Pre-Texts aims at making visible this de-constructive phenomenon. It is a methodology that believes in and fosters democracy, but one that does so in an oblique manner. Seeing literature as a non-essential fact, as one that exists because of the relations we can establish with and through it, allows you to see other dynamics in a similar fashion. It develops an *ethos* of shared and malleable constructions. Take, for instance, the very timely notion of citizenship and everything it implies (rights, duties, protections, a sense of belonging, documents proving such belonging, the identification of a group of excluded subjects, the identification of enemies, allies, aliens, etc.). Noticing the artificiality of a notion like this one (or rather, the process of its construction) may help us see citizenship as less of an essential quality, defined by blood or birth, and more as the result of a series of rapports (that may or may not include blood and birth) *created* with and between individuals and the world,<sup>11</sup> in endless *renvois* or deferment.

For it is this mere possibility of infinite rapports and *renvois* that renders conflict dialectical. It is also what encourages Pre-Texts to work and re-work the same fragment of a text during several sessions. The diversity of participants (with their particular backgrounds and preferences), and the different perspectives that each art form brings to the table, guarantee endless and fruitful readings of the same text-fragment. Of course, and as it might often happen outside of a classroom setting, some of those reading would be trite, other might appear farfetched, and a few may seem exciting, or completely novel. The beauty of Pre-Texts (which is not a given in the *real world*) is that the existence of those readings doesn't prevent the existence or visibility of others. A skeptic might argue that this is only

<sup>11</sup> Nancy would speak here of *etants*. See Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Le Sens Du Monde*. Editions Galilée, 2001. Print.

possible because, while engaged with Pre-Texts, students are *really* only playing. But wasn't play the foundation of our more *serious* and solid institutions (religion, science, law, war, politics)?<sup>12</sup>

### **Using art to shape (and re-shape) your brain**

So far, I have argued that Pre-Texts is a methodology that may be useful when confronted with matters of emancipation, sense-making, redistribution of the sensible, reduction of violence, and community building. However, aside from all these sincere but still ambitious notions, Pre-Texts is, first and foremost, an attempt to revive and reinvigorate the love for reading.

One could argue that playing with a text, making art from it, is a seedling endeavor to bring about deep changes in our societies. Unquestionably, playing, allows one to be other, to follow disparate rules and instruction, to try and fail, and to have fun. When we play, we become *plastic* beings—we are suddenly able to easily receive and give form.

This plasticity, apparent when playing and constitutive of our human biology, has come to be a key concept in neurosciences. Recent developments in this field have discovered that the human brain is an organ both modifiable and shaping. Our brains share the adaptability, and the potential for mutation that we have seen in our communities—or maybe it is because our brains are modifiable that our communities can be constantly reconfigured.

Understanding that our brains (and thus, ourselves) are plastic, and that we exist in an ongoing and never-ending process of transformation, opens up huge possibilities in terms of how to think and envision ways of being together. If, as 'neurophilosophy'<sup>13</sup> proposes, the brain is in continuous transformation, and if the subject is constituted in, by, and through the brain, we must then admit that the human subject (at least in the light of contemporary thinking) is far from being a fixed entity. Nor could this be the case of communities, insofar as they are collectivities of subjects.

This brain plasticity is not, however, something that just *happens*. It is, without a doubt, an important characteristic of the development of the brain but it is also one that needs and depends on the interactions that each subject has with the outside world (the environment, other subjects, new ideas, perspectives, etc.). And the quality and scope of our brain development is directly proportional to the diversity and richness of our interactions. For instance (to take an example identified by Catherine Malabou), the development of our vision, during early childhood, depends on the amount of things and variations we see. The more input we receive, the better and more comprehensive networks our brains build—thus the better our vision develops.

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<sup>12</sup> See Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens*. Madrid: Alianza, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Malabou, Catherine. *Que Faire De Notre Cerveau?* Seconde édition. Montrouge: Bayard, 2011. Print.

It is not difficult to link this phenomenon with the effect that arises by the exposure to multiple interpretations and approaches that Pre-Texts makes possible. Realizing that the notion of plasticity is biologically inherent to humans has ethical, political, and aesthetic implications. If our brains (and we have argued, our communities as well) can be shaped and modified, we need to seriously think how we want to participate in this process, and the role education is to play in it.

Being aware of the brain's plasticity (which is, also, being aware of the plasticity of the subject as a *thinking* entity) implies being critically conscious of one's own constitution as a subject, including the outside factors contributing to such a constitution. Catherine Malabou, re-reading Foucault, will put the process in the following terms:

Être critique, c'est savoir s'inventer soi-même, savoir se donner à soi-même, au présent, sa propre forme. Être plastique en un mot, 'se prendre soi-même comme objet, d'une élaboration complexe et dure, (...) ce qui, on le voit, entraîne pour conséquences que la critique va s'exercer non plus dans la recherche de structures formelles qui ont valeur universelle, mais comme enquête historique à travers les événements qui nous ont amenés à nous constituer comme sujets de ce que nous faisons, pensons, disons (16)<sup>14</sup>.

The possibilities brought to the table by what I've called here a 'neuro-philosophical' perspective are worth a closer look that I can only hint at in this short paper. Nonetheless, these possibilities help us realize that if the brain is capable of multiple and continuous shaping and rearrangements, then the human potential for emancipation and agency turns out to be not only social and political, but also biological (which will, in turn, be political and social). Plasticity allows constant configurations of the worlds we inhabit and the ways in which we want to lead our lives and write our history<sup>15</sup>.

As a consequence, plasticity becomes our very own performative device. We can consciously and willingly act upon our brains to modify connections, and we do so by exposing ourselves to others. By having contact with different stimuli (words, perspectives, cultures...) we can shape how, what and who do we want to be. And since brain plasticity is nearly endless, we can always choose to be someone else, try a different approach, change the rules, or gather the elements to build a new possible world or a fresh reading of the one we dwell in. Just like playing a game.

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<sup>14</sup> Being critical is knowing how to invent oneself, knowing how to presently shape oneself. In a word, being critical is being plastic, taking oneself as the object of a complex and difficult elaboration [...] This entails that criticism will be exercised not through the quest of universal formal structures, but rather as a historical inquiry that includes the events leading to the constitution of our ownself as a subject that acts, thinks, and utters (My translation).

<sup>15</sup> About this matter, Malabou's states, "[...] revendiquer une véritable plasticité du cerveau revient à exiger de savoir ce que le cerveau peut faire et pas seulement tolérer. Par le verbe 'faire' nous n'entendons pas seulement 'faire' des mathématiques ou du piano, mais bien faire son histoire, devenir le sujet de son histoire, saisir le lien entre la part de non déterminisme génétique à l'œuvre dans la constitution du cerveau et la possibilité d'un non déterminisme social et politique, en un mot d'une nouvelle liberté, d'une nouvelle signification de l'histoire" (58).

What I find most amazing and exciting about the theories I've referred to here and about the pedagogical results that Pre-Texts achieves, including a user-friendly command of theory, is that they allow us to build and maintain the worlds to come and the kind of rapports we want them to be based upon.

This, I believe, is more than a solid reason to explain and encourage our ever growing 'art-ed euphoria.'

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