

ABSTRACT

Artist and full-time teacher Jorge Lucero works at the idea that his teaching practice can be his artistic practice.

Running in Place Is Dumb/Great

Jorge Lucero



“Disinterested” Work: Knitting, Playing Chess, Driving a Taxi. Short-Term Objectives. A Time-Space-person Relation Dedicated to the Day and to That Which Is Immediate. To Construct a House Just to Construct a House (Schwitters). To Make a Museum Just to Have an Office (Broodthaers). To Form a Factory to Produce Money and Buy Things (Warhol). A Political Party for Planting Trees (Beuys). To Play Chess. To Read (Borges). To Play Chess. Billiards. To Play the Landscape (Mondrian). To Play the Bull (Picasso). To Play the Sailor. The Businessman, the Bureaucrat, the Tourist. The Designer.

Ver. p. 54

—Gabriel Orozco, 1999

Not too long ago, mid-way through one of my daily, five-mile runs, I began to feel a small pain slightly below my knee. Instead of stopping, I insisted on running in pain because I had become paranoid about the negative effects any break in my exercise regimen would have on my body. The consistency of this daily exercise over the last ten months had contributed to me losing over eighty pounds and dropping from an extra-large to a medium in both pants and shirt sizes. Although I don't

particularly enjoy running, I certainly have become addicted to the benefits of these small, daily workouts. Every day I invest 2 to 3 percent of my time in exchange for a smaller, more energetic body, a clearer mind, and a more patient temperament, all of which I believe allow me to do my work in this world more efficiently.

I had missed days of running before, but all of a sudden the projected days of non-running threw me into a psychosomatic panic. Afraid that a pause in my routine would instantly reverse the transformation I had seen in my being, I attempted to run the next day, which only worsened my condition. This practice of running had become art making, using discipline and risk, learning through the body to perpetuate the new. And like an artist trained in a craft, confident in their practice, or ignorant of alternative approaches, I refused to alter my use of the form or the expectations I placed on the content. I expected my body to continue to reap the same benefits from incompatible, worn-out methods.

For many years I used to believe that there was no way to get to anywhere as an artist if it wasn't through doing the specific thing an artist designates to oneself when one becomes art conscious. There is an unwritten law that states that artists must make their art to validate their claim to the professional title. I was trained as a studio painter, and for many years after I left school I felt that if I stopped painting or dedicated less time to my studio practice that it would disqualify me as an artist. Making paintings taught me to construct puns. Puns taught me that everything was two things. The omnipresence of double meanings gave me a bountiful filter to look at the world with. However, the necessity of engaging in a studio practice in order to nurture this filter was so ingrained in me that when the studio practice became burdensome, I opted to work myself into injury rather than find alternative methods to access the poetic potential of things.

When I started teaching in 2000, all I wanted to do was quit. I wanted to be in the studio. While working as a teacher, I would daydream about the studio. My thoughts were not so much about the work I was making in the studio, just about the chance to be in the studio. I suppose I thought that if I was in the studio, I would make more work, which would lead to more ideas, which would lead to more work, which would validate me as the artist I went to college to become! Teaching, a profession that puts a heavy demand on an artist's time, demanded that the best hours of my days be sacrificed to it. Despite the strain that teaching had become on my studio practice, I tried to resist altering my course as a studio artist, regularly reminding my students and their parents that I was an artist and had quick intentions to move along. My understanding of the situation narrowly relied on this cliché: Those who can, do, and those who can't, teach. The implied decentralized, collaborative, and nonegotistical culture of teaching had no place in my overly romanticized, heroic understanding of the truth-seeking studio practitioner.

Whenever I have the opportunity to make a work, be it a lecture, exhibit, performance, or article, I try to put myself in a position where I can collate all the different things I'm currently working with, all the stuff I'm collecting, and some unexpected interruptions, into something that can address the needs of that particular work. In thinking about how I could incorporate my running learning into one of my works, a reoccurring motif kept emerging in my imagination. It was the image of a man, most likely myself, running on a treadmill while trying to accomplish the task of giving a lecture. Essentially, the challenge in this image, both for presenter and audience, is that the conditioning of the runner's physical body and circumstances of the run would dictate the rhythm of the runner's

speech. But the metaphor that intrigues me most here is that of the stationary traveler who is in motion yet is only echoing the machinery of that treadmill by moving from “nowhere toward nowhere.” I first came across this idea of “nowhere toward nowhere” while reading *The Labyrinth of Solitude* by Octavio Paz (1961). Paz is discussing what happens to the Mexican (who he describes as an innately detail-oriented, dedicated laborer and lover of original object making) when he becomes an “industrial wage earner.” He says:

[the worker] gets reduced to an element in the work process, i.e., to an object ...who can be bought and sold. Somebody who makes things that he has no ownership over. The abstraction that characterizes him—work measured by time—does not separate him from other abstractions. On the contrary, it binds him to them. This is the reason he is lacking in mystery, in strangeness. It is the cause of his transparency, which is no different form that of any other instrument.

...It is said that we live in a world of techniques. Despite the differences in salary and way of life, the situation of the technician is essentially like that of the worker: he too is salaried and lacks a true awareness of what he creates. A government of technicians—the ideal of contemporary society—would thus be a government of instruments. Functions would be substituted for ends, and means for creators. Society would progress with great efficiency but without aim, and the repetition of the same gesture, a distinction of the machine, would bring about an unknown form of immobility, that of a mechanism advancing from nowhere toward nowhere.¹

Although the physical body running in place appears to not be advancing, although the collaborative worker seems to not be making and has become a type of gear, the moment-to-moment running that literally goes to no new place does produce a change in the body. The collaborative effort does make new in the collaborator. That change, that alteration of the physical being, of the mental being, of the spiritual being is somewhere.

I'd like to think that each individual's trek to the realization of everything's potential duality is a personal experience that comes with time. The details of how I arrived at a “studio-free” lifestyle would require me to fill the rest of this article with an inordinate amount of large quotes from a huge stack of books. However, I can say that my transition to this way of thinking, although forced by my circumstances, makes perfect sense because I don't feel like I've compromised the integrity of what I was looking for when I was adamantly pursuing a studio practice. I'm still researching the same things. I just have different mediums.

I currently spend the first eight to nine hours of the weekdays at Northside College Prep High School, where I have taught for six years. Then I spend the remaining hours of the day outside of school, mostly with my wife and three small boys. On the weekends, we visit with friends, or extended family, watch sports and movies and go to church. I do not work in the studio anymore. Somewhere along the way I imagined a painter's body with eyes that couldn't see and a body that had no ability to hold or manipulate tools, like brushes or paint. Would this type of paralysis stop the artist from working? It occurred to

me that becoming a teacher and having a family created a similar type of stillness in the body that made the work. It incapacitated the seeming self-government of my time use. It made me do what I could never do in the studio: live with others.

All of this seems bad if the assumption is made that the work happens in the studio. I now understand that as much as it can happen in the studio, it can happen outside of the studio, but only because they are both places where interruptions can occur. When I'm playing with my children, when I'm eating my dinner, when I am going to the bathroom, reading, driving, shopping at the grocery store, it seems like the interruptions are much more immediate and unexpected. In other words, the work happens when I am in the world. Although some would say that this is merely where the work originates, I would like to propose that the origin of the work can also be the work, even if the artist had no hand in its inception as an object or an event, as long as the artist initiates it as work. Matthew Goulish, a member of the performance group Goat Island and a teacher of mine, begins to answer the question "what is a work?" in his book *39 Microlectures* like this:

A work is an object [that] is infinite and singular. By infinite, I mean that the singularity of the work, which allows us in fact to refer to it as a work, is itself comprised of infinite events. We can divide those events into two kinds of infinities: first the infinity of microevents on a molecular, atomic, and subatomic level, because anything which is noticeable must be made up of parts which are not; and second the infinity of macroevents, that are happening in our present, and that have happened in our past, and clearly define a work, and temper and shape our perceptions of it and our responses to it.²


So if the origin is the work, then playing blocks with my kids, buying unfamiliar beets at the grocery store, going for my morning run are my work. And if those are my work, then I need not be desperate that my teaching practice does not allow me the time to create in the studio because I can also say that the classroom can be the work. I've gone from working in the studio for eight to ten hours to working outside of the studio sixteen to seventeen hours a day, or if you count sleep, which I do (sleep is the equivalent of priming canvas), then 24 hours a day. In some way this makes me feel like the most powerful artist on earth, and it liberates me from the pressure of making work, which had turned into the worst kind of labor and the labor of being a "technician" an artist "(repeating) the same gesture" to the point of "immobility."

Ironically, having understood my place outside of the studio has actually strengthened my studio practice. Occasionally, without me looking for it, I have an opportunity to be in

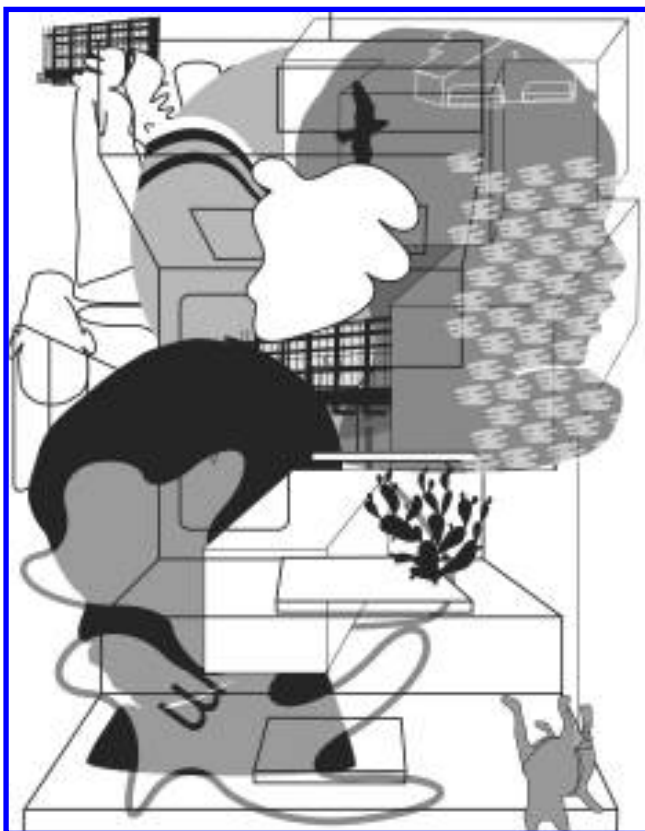


the studio. When this chance is afforded to me, I find that I don't linger in the studio the way I used to. I can work nonstop. Strangely enough, there is no shortage of ideas. I make work in the studio that is related to the work I make in the world, not the other way around. It's like I've been conditioning my artbody for a marathon. Post working in the studio I don't usually suffer from an emotional or spiritual letdown. As a matter of fact, at that point it's time to get back to work.

This article that you are reading is my art practice. It isn't a testimony or philosophical declaration anymore than an object made in the studio could be. It is a thing that is the thing now. It is a thing that hopefully will mutate. It is a thing that I would hope to see your response to, a response that need not mirror my form. This work contains the elements of the work that I'm currently making. Lately that's consisted of self-imposed rules that set up parameters in which larger things could happen. Although the rules are always changing depending on the components of current investigations, let us suppose that I currently work with these three:

1. The rules and the works must produce more rules and works. There's no indication as to how quickly this has to be done or whether or not the consequent production has to come from me. The original does not have to metamorphose into new things. This rule embodies the life of its purpose. The rule could have read, "Do something with this two times." It just presents the opportunity for the initiation of action. When I worked in the studio, all action had a goal: it was working toward the display of certain key monuments of the studio practice. These works were the end of a long process. They were the evidence of process. The objects that summarized. Unfortunately, the actions that led up to the studio work were many times ignored, taken for granted, accepted as the labor at the service of the work. I offer up the question, "Can the labor, and the service, and the work, be the work?"
 2. To fearlessly allow the thing at hand to feel slightly wrong. To allow the subject under action to feel slightly larger than what can be handled, to allow the confidence you feel in your handling of the thing at hand to feel slightly precarious, to feel uncertain about the outcomes, to treat it like a performance that depends on circumstances, audience, health, and all sorts of other things that are out of one's control ... to allow failure, failure without learning, dumbness, anxiety, lack of skill, lack of long-lastingness, invention of definitions, illogic, copying, "unartness," run on sentences, abrupt endi
 3. The work must never be harmful to others or to you. A very famous artist who has been working on a project for many years was asked in an interview how much it had cost to take on such an endeavor. To which he responded, "It cost me two marriages and a relationship." Art can't possibly be worth that much. The thing is truly worthless if there is no one, besides yourself, for whom you are making it. Because in everything we make we change, and that is for the benefit or detriment of others. Ultimately, the way that the work can be most harmful is when it is time consuming. Not to be confused with time wasting, which indicates a deliberate investment of ones time toward nonproductive behavior. I'd like to offer up the thought that life (which is by choice), not death (which is inevitable) generates life.
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At this point I would like to offer up a rest for one part of the brain and an activity for another. This image:



Besides the relief of pressure from my time and relationships, the fact that my teaching practice is my art practice also enhances my teaching experience and makes tolerable the bureaucratic aspects of this profession. I would go as far as saying it makes them productive. It makes all the vernacular things spiritual things. Not because they have spirits but because I do. My creative response to the inanimate and routine has a deep repercussion and reproduction in me. Filling out paperwork, taking attendance, babysitting at assemblies, giving out grades, attending meetings all turn into elements of performance art. A community, be it students, coworkers, or a family is a mirror in which the performer can truly see the body. This mirror allows me to be the critic and critiqued simultaneously, which leads to dual fruits: 1) the fruit from the critique on the critiqued and 2) the fruit from the critique on the critic.³

I'm not interested in doing work that is a divergence from my goal; that would be a consumption of my time. My goal is for the work to be a work that teaches. I would like the work to teach me at some point and also others. I don't mean teaching as a didactic

attempt to address specific needs or purposefully fill gaps that need to be filled. I stand in a position, much like my work, where I can't seem to speak to situations in their entirety, so I'm not able to make too many pronouncements with a lot of confidence. Teaching is not the practice of showing someone where they are wrong, or showing something in its entirety, but leading an individual to an experience. The individual will then address the thing with their own knowledge base and create synthesis with other things, ideas, and experiences that will then birth new things into the world. This newly improved individual will be able to say, "Look at this collection of things that I have experienced; together they are something new." Teaching is to show individuals elements of the world without giving away the mystery. Teaching is trusting that that person will have the capacity of mind and drive of spirit to be able to look at the thing and either store it for later use, use it then for later storage, or resist it. Teaching is finding the thing that is full of the latent and trust that its secrets will reveal themselves. In this same way I don't think that the work is about the artist as much as it's about the looker. And I don't think that my work is that much about the teacher as much as it is about the student. Not because I concentrate on the student, I certainly concentrate on myself, but because I offer the student the opportunity to be with me, look at me, and take me as a work that they can then experience, store, synthesize, or discard at their discrepancy.

I'd like to end this work by quoting one of the six beginnings I composed for this work before I messed up my knee, and by presenting a new work called *dumb face*:

What new medium is teaching? What is the history of teaching as a creative process? How is teaching in 2006 an art practice that contributes to the discourse of Contemporary Art? How is my teaching an artwork? I am an artist. I make work. I rarely make objects, despite having been trained as a painter. I do not consider myself a failed painter. I'm always thinking about painting. I feel tremendous loyalty to the history and current practices of painting. I exist as an artwork. I live as an artwork. I work as an artwork.



Endnotes

- ¹Paz, Octavio, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 68.
- ²Goulish, Matthew, *39 Microlectures* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 99.
- ³To read more about this critique changing the critic business, take a look at Goulish's microlecture on criticism (*39 Microlectures*, 43–47). It's awesome!!!

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- a. is married to maribel.
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- c. lives and works in Chicago, Illinois.
- d. constantly thinks about how his book collection can be rearranged.