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Atmospheres: Shattering the Architecture to Generate Another Educational Discourse in Art Education

José María Mesías-Lema
University of A Coruña, Spain

Tiffany López-Ganet
University of A Coruña, Spain

Guillermo Calviño-Santos
University of A Coruña, Spain

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Abstract

This article seeks to share the experience gained in the expository project *Atmospheres for Educational Change*, a curatorial proposal focused on education that took place at Normal, the cultural intervention space at the University of A Coruña, aimed at criticizing the position of contemporary art in education and society. *Atmospheres* reflected on the life and routines of individuals in collectivity. It invited

the spectator to an interaction between the aesthetic artificiality of the created environment and the naturalness of the sensations generated within. These were environments that invited discomfort, with artistic installations that functioned as social agitators—politically incorrect and educationally transformative.

Introduction

Atmospheres, for Educational Change (*Atmospheres*, for short) was a curatorial project proposed and developed by José María Mesías-Lema at the Normal center of the University of A Coruña in 2015 (<https://bit.ly/2I89IE4>). Seven contemporary inhabit artists (Mesías-Lema, 2019) sought reflection and action around the status of education through the proposal of art installations—presented as personal, autonomous atmospheres with their own educational perspective—and other related events. The resulting responses to these installations and events were independent and heterogeneous, due to the freedom conferred by the curator. The dialogue between the public's interventions and experimentation with the proposed space raised awareness about the role of art education in society.

The former Normal School for Teacher Training was designed by Galician architect Antonio Tenreiro (A Coruña, 1893-1972) in 1955. Tenreiro was an important Galician architect of the 20th century whose architectural works remain a symbol of the city. Examples of his work include Pastor Bank, Barrié House, O Graxal, Savoy Cinema, and San Agustín Market, among others. More recently, the unique space of the Normal school went from center for teacher training to a venue for artistic intervention. What is now referred to as Normal: Cultural Intervention Space was restored in 2011 to become the University of A Coruña's space for artistic intervention. Although the building began as an institution that enshrined the norms and rules of its time, its recent transformation into a cultural space has called such norms into question. For example, the name of the building was intentionally maintained throughout its conversion to a contemporary space for creation and debate among youth and alternative cultures. Today, Normal stands as a location for the production/coproduction of in-house initiatives and projects in areas such as: cinema, visual arts, multimedia, advanced music, volunteering, cooperation, and efforts toward a new contemporary scene.

A major challenge of Mesías-Lema's curatorship at the Normal center was to be able to shatter the space and generate a new architecture based on discovery by, and interaction with, the spectator. These new atmospheric architectures, interconnected with one another, sought to generate a profound reflection on educational change through contemporary art. This *work-in-progress* exhibition emerged from the discovery of a video documentary featuring the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco inaugurating the facilities of Normal—as the former

teacher training institution—in 1968 (Figure 1). This audiovisual piece prompted a reflection about architecture, power, and political control exercised over educational processes in Spain, from the beginning of democracy to the present day.

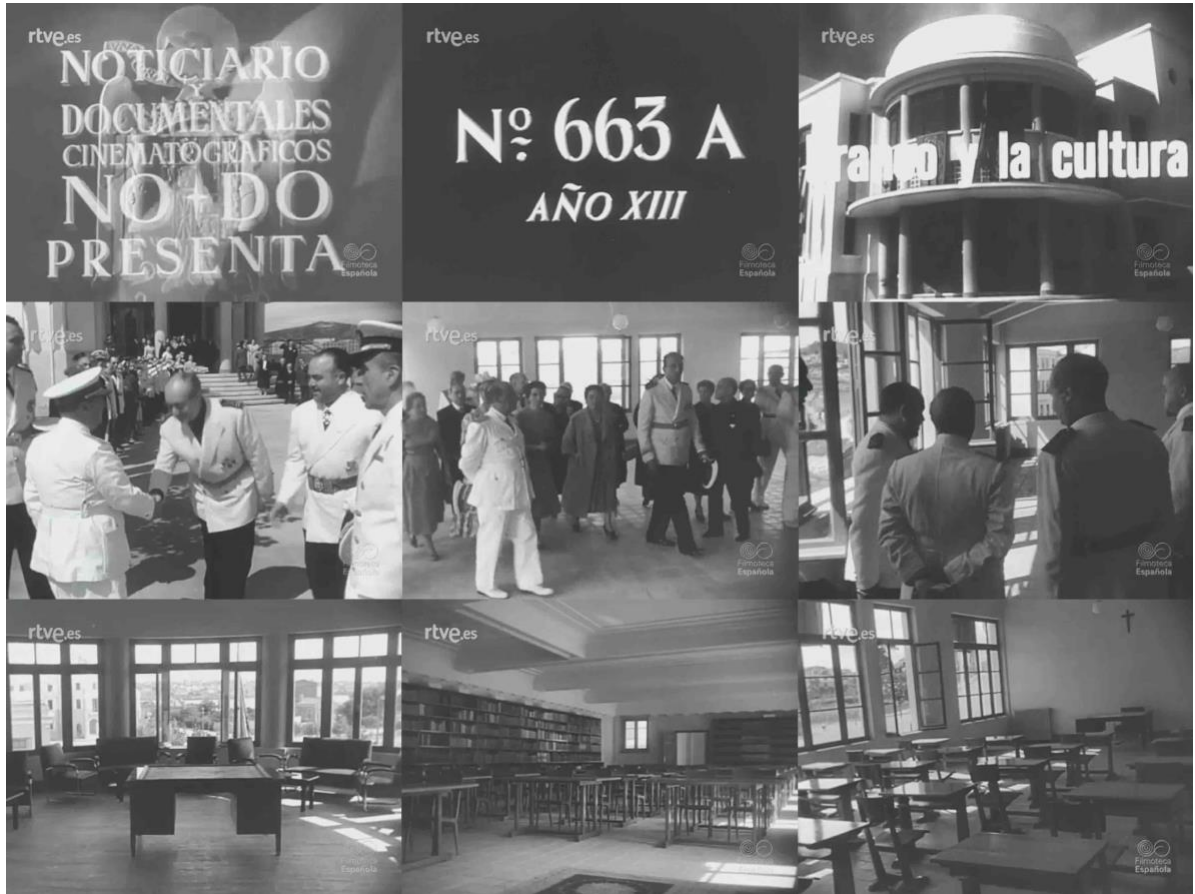


Figure 1. Collage of screenshots of NO-DO No. 663, the video that marked the beginning of the *Atmospheres* exhibition. NO-DO (Noticiarios y Documentales, or News and Documentaries) was a weekly news program obligatorily broadcast at every Spanish cinema before the movie started during Franco’s dictatorial regime. The NO-DO news program No. 663 shows the visit of Francisco Franco inaugurating the facilities of the Normal center as the former teacher training institution in 1968.

To understand the significance and evolution of the Normal center as a place of artistic and educational expression, it is important to locate the historical and sociopolitical framework where it began. The period was marked by the concentration of power in the figure of Franco, a dictator who ruled from the end of the civil war in 1939 until his natural death 36 years later. This was a time characterized by the removal of individual and social liberties and the enforcement of a model of social conduct dictated by the Catholic Church, which also monopolized education. Repression was constant throughout the dictatorship, and it was

particularly intense against teachers. The new education imposed by Franco's regime was meant to forge loyal and dedicated followers of the new Spain. Therefore, all aspects of educational innovation and progress were eliminated. Since then, educational spaces have been configured to support management and supervisory modes along with pedagogical models through the structure, volume, and form of their architecture. Today we know that what makes a space educational is related to the way people inhabit and use it. The historical evolution of these spaces has required a constant reformulation. In fact, the Normal center is a clear and exceptional example of this evolution; what was initially conceptualized as a center for teacher training has now become a center for artistic intervention.

Many authors have explored the power of control and subjugation in education. For example, Foucault's (2003) perspective focused on the control of the body to recognize the other's superiority. The panoptic architectural system constitutes the "utopia of the perfect confinement" (Foucault, 2003)—an architecture that establishes conduct and discipline. Moreover, more than 100 years ago Dewey (1900) conducted a study about the possibilities of the traditional educational system in terms of what was offered by its limited space. Dewey reflected on the ways in which furniture and different elements shaping the classroom were designed to encourage students to listen, identifying apathy, absorption, and lack of participation as consequences of the classroom environment. Surprisingly, these arrangements remain practically unchanged today.

For this artistic project we started from the premise that the arts, as defenders of a paradigm of resistance, do not succeed within the educational system (Bishop, 2012; Lippard, 1984). Each day society naturally assumes the exclusion of creative learning in the classroom—instigated by political spheres. We live in troubled, confused, disorderly times. We live in atmospheres, shaped by our experiences, that are not neutral but organic spaces—the places where conflicts, crises, experiential learning, relationships, ...life take place.

In this sense, neoliberalism goes beyond an economic or social policy, as it marks community life on the basis of the market, individualism, and the dismantling of public institutions and the decline in their quality on behalf of capitalist fluctuations capable of conditioning our life routines (Giroux, 2015). Although neoliberalism appears draped in democratic hues and justified in the defense of individual freedom, it in fact hinders the ability of the most disadvantaged sectors of the population—conditioned by a lack of resources and limited access to healthcare or quality education—to benefit from it. Thus, the current trend towards a transfer of power towards the center and a globalizing regulation of all social decisions affects every aspect of life, including education.

In this context, the school model emerges as a palpable element of the system. Although

palpable, this element is becoming disoriented within society, given that we are moving from a *society with a slow educational system* to a *society of constant learning*, creating a gap between system and social reality. The school and the educational system represent, today more than ever, a volatile atmosphere, affected by the bureaucratic and inoperative competitiveness of the business world, to the point of rendering education incapable of achieving a collective-humanist and optimistic vision for the comprehensive development of people.

This is where the essence of activism appears as a mode that moves along the edges of what is conventional “in the social clashes, in the subversive processes capable of combatting injustice, in the search for the commons, in the inter-creative and political learning environments, free culture, the defence of human rights, sensitivity towards others and hacker ethics” (Mesías-Lema, 2018, p. 26). From activism, we want to dismantle this situation around education and art education—we aim to fracture. Between fragments and fissures we create spheres of the quotidian, frontier architectures for discovery, creation, and invention; we create modes of action and critical thinking through artistic installations for educational change. *Atmospheres* are interactive spaces of unlimited possibilities. They are installations that immerse the spectator in a relational environment. Which way do we want to go? Or, which way should we sense the path from architecture and the arts in education?

According to Mesías-Lema (2018), “Activism is a neologism derived from ‘art’ and ‘activism’ ... [that] describes artists who are committed to creative processes of an activist nature rather than activists who resort to art as a form of vindication” (pp. 20-21). Many authors have theorised about this term, among them Lippard (1984) and Felshin (1995) stand out for having associated activism with protest art. Today, however, a distinction is made between political art that reproduces ideological representations and activism, which is conditioned by a cultural positioning of thought through art.

In *Atmospheres for Educational Change*—a reflection on the life and routines of individuals in collectivity—the frictions are incited between the personal and the communal, across all social strata, including marginalized groups. These frictions invite the spectator to an interaction between the aesthetic artificiality of the created environment and the naturalness of the sensations generated within. In this sense, none of the installations were designed to thrill, since emotions are generated from subjectivity, unconsciously, and in no case ensure the connection with the viewer.

Shattering the Existing Architecture for the Creation of New Atmospheres

"Space and form; and as a result: atmosphere. I believe this is the most essential theme in architecture" (Fujimoto, 2017, p. 10).

With this quote, the essential nature of *Atmospheres* is conveyed. *Atmospheres* are individual, interconnected architectural spaces that stimulate the senses, sensations, and sensitivity of the spectator in order to aid in their understanding of real processes that take place in education. By providing spaces where active and organic learning can be lived and experienced, *Atmospheres* aim to prompt an understanding of educational processes that includes aspects that are often overlooked. They function as social agitators—as possibility projects that are politically incorrect and educationally transformative.

Within this project, each atmosphere serves as a spatial wrapper—an environment that surrounds education, creating a space of friction that softens and reduces its speed to allow for encounters and reflection. Physical space plays a fundamental role when defining the volume that surrounds an experience such as the one described in these lines. Largely generated by the architectural space, intentions, emotions, and feelings take place alongside profound thoughts and associations within that contained air.

In this regard, this project serves as an invitation to ponder and analyze the role of architecture and its impact on the human experience—on people's lives. Indeed, architects, artists and educators seek new ways of producing experimental environments in which spatial objects act on the pedagogical, psychological, and cultural conditions of the citizenry. Along these lines, the teachings of Lao-Tsé, the Taoist philosopher, or Feng Shui already linked architecture with psychology, space, and individuals. Environments can influence states of mind. Thus, it is important to consider emotions, culture, and the personality of the people who will interact with the space (Lotito, 2017).

Previous Space

In terms of its location, Normal stands as close to the ocean as most parts of the city, and it is surrounded by secondary schools, a music conservatory, a foreign language school, and other university faculties. The building incorporates some of the most sophisticated and stately features of the architectural complex within Ciudad Escolar (school city) of A Coruña. In 1940, the cultural city “Generalísimo Franco” was constructed and now houses the university campus of Riazor, which is part of the University of A Coruña, and Ciudad Escolar.

Standing in front of the façade of the building in question, it appears sober and serious, featuring homogeneous rhythms centered around the entrance and its layout, including a circular tower that welcomes visitors between pillars and under a visor-like corbel. This welcoming cylinder articulates the building, featuring a public school on one side and the cultural intervention space that is the subject of this paper on the other (Figure 2). This serious appearance is outwardly visible in the form of neutral colors, stony materiality, uniform proportions, and symmetrical brushstrokes on its elevations.

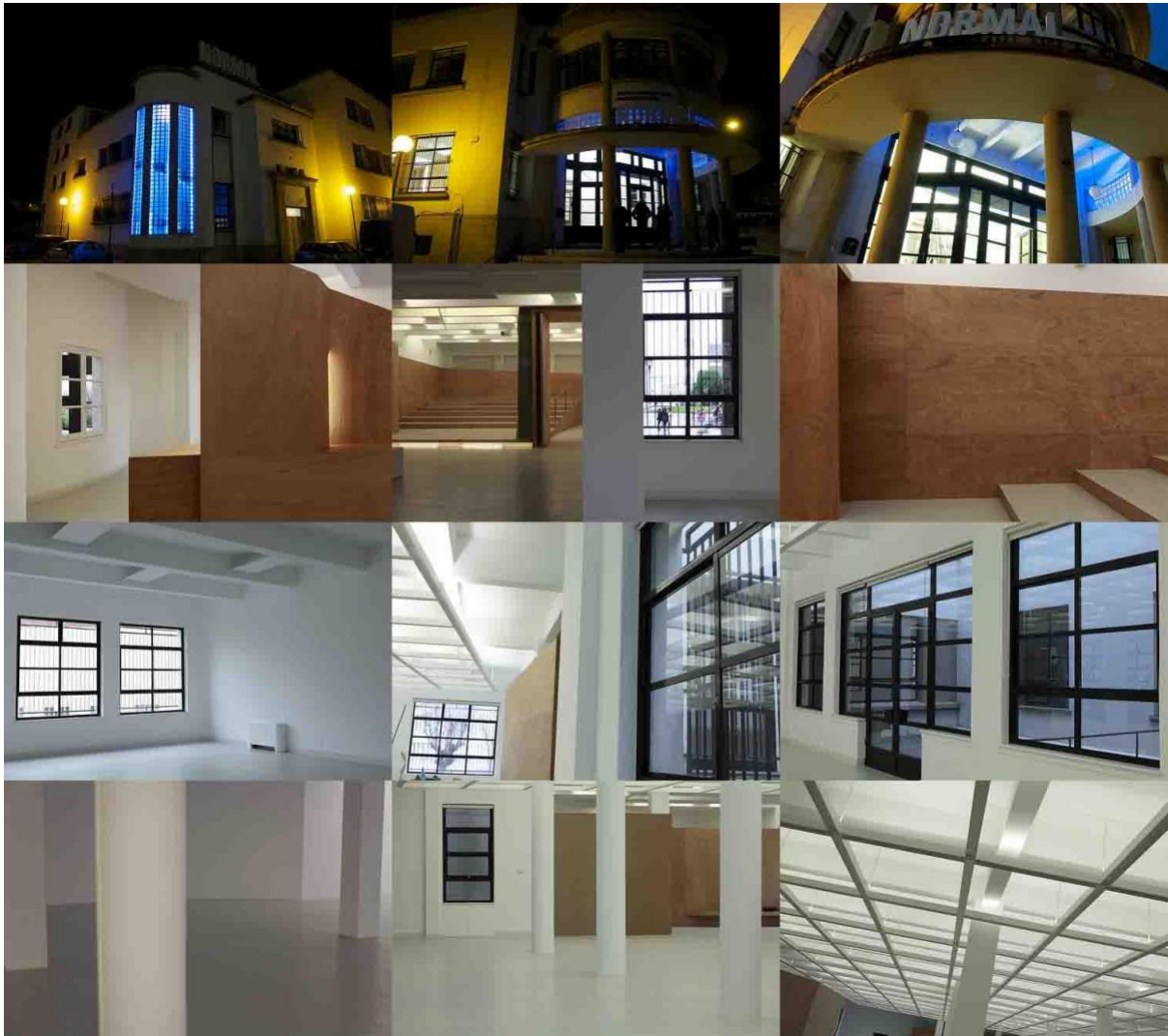


Figure 2. Collage of photographs from the exhibition space at Normal. (Photographs by Normal)

The perception of the building changes, however, when one crosses the doorway and arrives at the main space, which organizes the interior of the building by offering a robust but elegant three-section staircase that faces and welcomes every visitor. While impressive, these steps were not necessary to enter the *Atmospheres* exhibition, since it was located on the ground floor of the building. Prior to the implementation of this curatorial project, the exhibition space was conceived as a void—far from the compartmentalization that characterizes the rest of the building—with endless possibilities (Figure 2).

As if it were a world within another world, the exhibition hall of the new Normal is presented as a large, open, C-shaped (or "U-shaped," depending on how you look at it) space behind an imposing wooden door. The space is organized into three parts: a main space of ample

dimensions featuring an orderly forest of pillars in its center with two branches departing from it, one shaped like an auditorium, and another empty one of virtually the same dimensions. In this continuous, almost symmetrical space, there are only two conditioning elements in addition to the columns mentioned above—the reception furnishings at the entrance and the grandstand in the auditorium (Figure 2).

Going from the traditional austerity of the building's exterior to the contemporary austerity of the interior of the room, the space is characterized by the dialogue between the smooth white and the roughness of the wood, with the occasional appearance of the attractive carpentries that bathe the space with light—a series of conditioning factors and attractions that would determine the entire curatorial project.

What is the Idea of Atmospheres as a Curatorial Project?

“Curatorial practices in teacher training constitute a new form of dynamic institutionalisation, a relationship based on the intersection between museums, schools and universities, which legitimises artistic research in diverse pedagogical contexts, not exclusively curricular or formal” (Mesías-Lema, 2018, p. 23).

With this quote, the nature of *Atmospheres* as a curatorship is introduced. It is, at its essence, a curatorial project that goes beyond the mere production of an exhibition and selection of artifacts and works of art that align with an established discourse (Mesías-Lema, 2018). In this case, the curator granted full freedom of action to each intervening artist, confident that creative subjectivity was capable of generating heterogeneous responses —resulting in individual reactions that configured particular and always valid visions of learning. This approach followed what Soria (2016) described when he asserted that the curatorial project is presented as a way of legitimizing art and curatorship as critical and radical educational practices in themselves. Visitors of all ages complemented this undertaking through their interplay with the components and exhibitions, as well as their attendance to accompanying events.

Atmospheres is a sort of toolbox of educational values. Seven artists created seven different atmospheres and, in turn, produced a common one. Leo López, Julio Falagán, Amaya González Reyes, Javier Abad, Alg-a, Marcos Nine, and Adrián Crego agitated the spheres of the quotidian between discovery, creation, and invention. They crafted modes of acting and thinking critically for educational change. If we were to banalize each proposal by abstracting ourselves from the symbolic ambiguity that invades art, and if we could contain every atmosphere in a word, we could get this relation: surprise, reflection, interaction, control, generosity, loneliness, ingenuity, and excitement.

In the context of *Atmospheres*, the audience becomes a central component in the project. It is

the task of each spectator to assimilate whether or not the values conveyed by the artists are values of learning and education. As Fullaondo and Gauci-Seddon (2018) state, “developing a problem does not imply solving it; it might merely mean clarifying terms to allow a more in-depth discussion” (p. 117). Likewise, this melee of such individualized, free impressions presents, first and foremost, a certain complex, disorderly, and casually accurate scenario in the reproduction of chaos that reigns in our society’s educational model.

Alongside the exhibition, over a period of six months, visits and workshops were held with artists and schoolchildren at all educational levels. This enhanced the experience of public-school students and reinforced the project's ideas. These actions also established the educational mediation mechanisms proposed by the atmospheres. Visitors’ feedback was sought through their interaction with the art installations.

The rhizome presented above was led by: resident artists and their pieces; workshops and their resulting connections; the visits of children, adults, and teachers; the side events that took place while the exhibition was in progress; and, of course, the spectators. Each of the seven atmospheres functioned in an individual manner. Nevertheless, they were part of a collective discourse, and their connection was the aesthetic and relational experience with the audience (Bresler, 2018; Irwin & O’Donoghue, 2012). Each atmosphere was intended to be inhabited by the spectators as a metaphor for deep reflection on educational change.

Atmospheres for Educational change: A Curatorial Project in Art Education

Atmospheres: An Artistic Proposal for an Aesthetic Experience

When the time came to construct the exhibition, one could have resorted to augmented reality, huge screens with special effects, virtual reality, or the latest materials on the market. However, despite the ever-growing number of technological resources and development in this field, it is the senses that make up our main source of information. For this reason, technologies were incorporated into each one of the atmospheres with the challenging goal of enabling the body to experience the space in a performative way: feeling to incite thought.

This approach was based on the way we experiment and inhabit spaces: abruptly, hastily, quickly, and without paying sufficient attention to what surrounds us. For this reason, *Atmospheres* proposed “exercises that reflect the contemporary spirit of hybridization and experimentalism, that influence the collective production of works and that address the questions of perpetuity and transformation, and therefore embrace new modes of apprehension and understanding of time in the ‘fluid’ space of contemporaneity” (De Blas, 2008, p. 3).

In this sense, all the elements in the space were understood as added factors in the personal experience, promoting a participative involvement in the actions. These elements included the previous architecture, the materials, the light, the scenography, and the fragmentation of the space through artistic installations. In such an atmosphere, it made more sense than ever to define the space as shifting. For this reason, it is interesting to see how De Blas (2008, p. 2) links scenography and architecture when she says that “the recurrent experimentation of the scene in terms of the transformation and metamorphosis of scenic objects and their manipulation—handled, moved or transformed—into dynamic and progressive systems that allow for the permanent configuration of the space, generating new readings and places—to fragment, cutout, unite—is a kindred topic and one of architectural interest.”

This process resulted in an attempt to discover the nature of an atmospheric architecture, stimulating the spectator to think, reflect, and be provoked by the rupture of the space, generating a new piece. We were thinking about an experimental architecture capable of influencing our sense of space with its materiality and its form to transport us to concepts, theories, and modes of action in educational systems. This supports Pallasmaa’s (2016) argument stating that, “the task of architecture is not only to provide physical shelter, facilitate activity and stimulate sensory pleasure [...]; buildings are mental projections, they are the exteriorization of imagination, memory and the conceptual capacities of human beings” (pp. 89-90).

As far as the design of the exhibition is concerned, we were particularly attracted to the idea of chaos remaining latent. The itinerary began to become tangible from a labyrinthine image that kept suspense constant, strolling from one atmosphere to another without ever knowing what was next, like an inscrutable destination. Through the design of the exhibition, we created a route in which the spectator was completely disoriented and was forced to continue onwards, encouraged by the mystery, but also trapped in a one-way flow, simulating an unstoppable lifeline where all those values linked to learning would appear without exception (Figure 3).

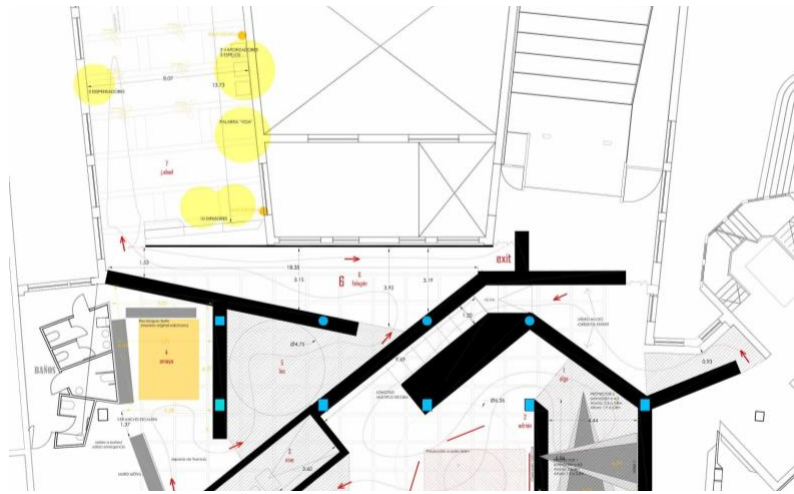


Figure 3. The image shows the ground floor of the Normal building, the space where the exhibition *Atmospheres for Educational Change* unfolded. The blueprint shows the relationship between the previous space and the new project, skillfully showing the existing structure of walls and pillars, the fixed furnishings, the creation of new facings to delimit the space as intended, and the proposed itinerary. (Drawing by Normal)

Atmospheres for Educational Change resorted to the instability of the spectator through an architectural labyrinth, where visitors had to stroll through the space, opening doors, bending over, or even feeling the instability in his or her own body when the rigid floor vanishes thanks to other materials placed ad hoc, such as foam flooring at the beginning of the exhibition. This approach is aligned with Fujimoto (2017), who states, “architecture is made from neutral materials, but once they are used to work in harmony with the set of elements, the materials are sublimated full of nuances” (p. 10).

The visitors’ role followed what was stated by Hernández and Martín (1998), when they described how the spectator has become one of the most significant priorities of art, going from “having a passive role in the process of contemplation of the work to actively intervening in it whether by interpreting it, manipulating it or even as part of its components” (p. 45). The spectator was forced to enter and exit using a single track, as a metaphor of the educational system. Once inside the exhibition, the visitor could roam the space and experience each atmosphere as desired.

Along the same lines, both the artist’s intention and the visitor’s reaction engaged in a dialogue about interaction and society. As Pelowski, Liu, Palacios, & Akiba (2014) argued, art is created in an attempt to become noticed and perceived by social others turning the

creative process of producing art into an adequate and culturally sound means of stating an individual's "social existence" (p. 2). This process of exchange and self-reflection became apparent, creating a synergy of sorts between the artist, the art installation, the audience, and the architecture.

The Role of Architecture in Transforming Education: Designing the Exhibition Space

In the exhibition, education was presented through architectural spheres that functioned in isolation as constructed ideas, as Campo Baeza (1996) would say, materialized in an essential space, illuminated by light and capable of arousing emotion: an architecture that was conceptually inclusive and formally exclusive. A space to house *Atmospheres* needed to feature a kind of Gestalt arrangement where each part, each expression of an artist recreating his or her own particular atmosphere, would not be disturbed by another one and, at the same time, its spatial bond would help to establish connections between them. Like nodes in a network or stars in a galaxy, each atmosphere had to remain within its subjectivity. The architectural space would be that network or galaxy, an absent but active protagonist in the synapse between artistic installations.

The architectural project began with a physical dematerialization, including the severe transformation of the original room, such that the usual space would be unrecognizable; it would vanish, and only a concatenation of artistic installations would exist—each one, an atmosphere. To achieve this, the space was organized in such a way that each piece was isolated, had the necessary dimensions and spatial characteristics, and the visitor's attention was not distracted by the neighbor. The partitions, which arose ingeniously by embedding the existing pillar structure, created the sought-after labyrinth and the independence of each part of the network previously described.

When it comes to the building, this idea of simplicity is materialized in the form of uninterrupted darkness; a gloom that embraced the totality of each atmosphere. This constant black hue provided unity and coherence to the route and dominated the space, which disappeared completely, achieving a result similar to that described by Tanizaki (2008) when he stated that the indirect and diffuse light that appears in this endless shadow becomes the essential element of architectural beauty. Without constituting a residence, which is the predominant architectural form in the Japanese architect's text, the portrayed performance somehow sought the magic of everyday life.

Although very distant and in total contrast, there was a dialogue between the new and the old that made the exhibition and its location truly special. This conversation between the tradition of the building's façades, roofing, and materials, and the innovation, clarity, and modernity of its interior surfaces was truly rhythmic and rich. Moreover, the encounter between the outside

light, the brightness and immensity of the day, and the shadows of the closed space between the walls of Normal was magical. This continuous darkness was sought in order to focus attention on the atmospheres in each individual installation. These became new light bulbs, breaking the night in the form of independent beams within a storm.

Furthermore, one quality that the exhibition design itself sought to strengthen was an aesthetic and emotional sensibility. In order to enliven the emotivity in the artist's atmosphere, the surrounding space had to be fully attuned to the artist's proposal; hence its fluid, chameleon-like condition: it adapted its secondary container role to the main content role, melding with it, intensifying it.

Satellite Events that Nurtured and Reconciled the Curatorial Discourse and New Proposals in Artistic Education

As a curatorial project in Art Education (Agra, M. J. & Mesías-Lema, 2011; Mesías-Lema, 2018), *Atmospheres for Educational Change* brings together critical pedagogy, cultural policies, and arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2018) as educational mediation. Each atmosphere implies a sensitive encounter between the artistic activity and the visitors' experience. The exhibit was experienced by visitors across educational levels: early childhood, primary, and secondary education. Additionally, three events related to its proposed discourse were organized: *Fracasa Mejor! (Fail Better!)*, *Periféricos (Peripheral)*, and *Boicot al sistema (Boycott to the System)*.

The first event, called *Fail Better*, promoted a reflexive exercise on the dull aspects of artistic production. This experience generated an open dialogue with contemporary artists and cultural managers who pondered the recent reconversion of art production systems into "creative industries." While *Atmospheres* proposed a reflection on installation options embedded in contemporary art and seeking resources of thought and action for educational change, *Fail Better's* forced reconversion of the artist as a creative, entrepreneurial worker, responded to a business model of artistic production.

At its core, *Fail Better* was an attempt to reverse fairly standardized and extended models of art production for the public display of creative projects and producers. It represented a criticism of events in which a limited number of speakers make scheduled interventions before an audience arranged according to traditional stage conventions. Each brilliant and seductive performance was sought for its capacity to astonish the public with the novelty and extraordinary nature of the activities—with special emphasis on the "creative" character. Moreover, this model was intended to encourage the speakers to describe the less brilliant part of their apparently successful careers, revealing their failures—small or large, uncovering the

fictitious aspects of the mainstream story associated with their activity, and inciting skepticism towards the established models of success.

The last two events were *Peripheral* and *Boycott to the System*. *Peripheral*, was a micro-festival that enabled the audience to meet different artists and multidisciplinary performance projects, including experimental music, words, perfoepoetry, and new media technology applied to artistic contexts. Finally, *Boycott to the System: Intervention Proposals Beyond the Conventional* brought together a group of experts in the fields of art, neuroscience, and education. They highlighted active and innovative proposals outside the conservative methodologies of the conventional education system through a TEDx format. The confluence of the atmospheres and these three events called the status of education into question, a space that is more than quotidian as well as fossilized.

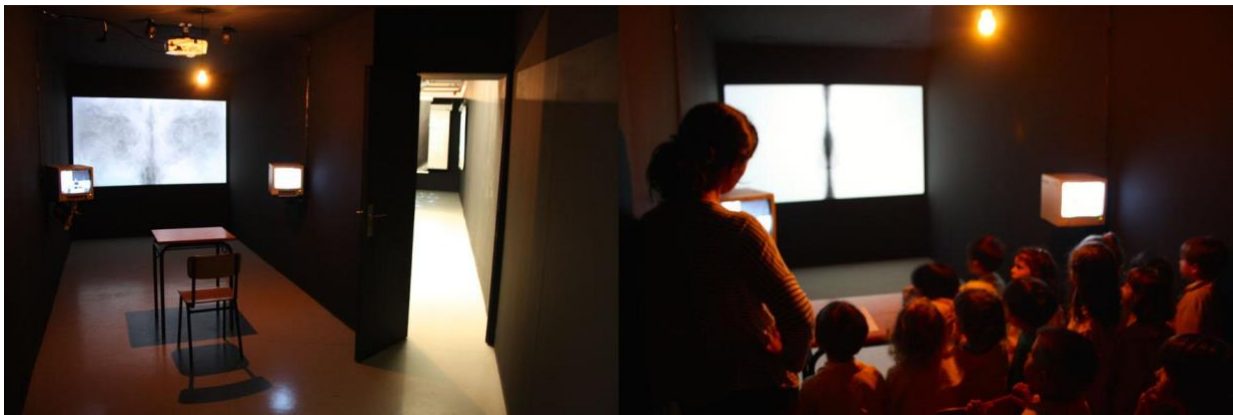


Figure 4. Collage of photographs from the staging process for the exhibition *Atmospheres for Educational Change*, at Normal. (Photographs by Normal)

Exploring Space, Inhabiting Atmospheres, Questioning what is Educational

When Bourgault (2018) describes art as a social place to meet and find experiences with the sole intention of incorporating artistic pieces into day-to-day living, she expresses a different purpose than that of art with a pedagogical direction. It is meant to “create a type of experience in the Deweyan sense—an experience that specifically leads to the construction of knowledge, or in a larger sense, to the production of culture” (p. 5). In the next paragraphs, we will proceed to describe each of the Atmospheres in a way that resembles the design process and the journey of the spectator.

Beyond the initial concepts, it is worth noting that the articulation of the architectural space stemmed from a conversation with filmmaker and video creator Marcos Nine. From his seductive proposal we extracted conditions of strict confinement, simulating a very sinister classroom. This restriction became an opportunity to confer character to the itinerary, to make it more stimulating. Instead of conceiving this classroom as an isolated room that risked being missed by the visitor, it was envisaged as a forced pass-through in such a way that, despite the fear produced by the idea of opening its enigmatic door, one could sense that it was necessary and obvious to do so. With such a naive argument, Nine's asphyxiating classroom atmosphere, which tested us, became the hinge of the tour. The artist invited us to rethink the inconsistency and randomness of the test—a traditional source of pressure to find a unique and valid answer. It provoked an unbreathable and distressing atmosphere for the spectator, imprisoned by four black-roofed walls, controlled at all times, and urged by the infernal quiet rhythm of the seconds hand that marks an inextensible time (Figures 5 and 6).



Figures 5 and 6. Left. Marcos Nine, *Puntos De Autoridade*, in *Atmospheres for Educational Change*. Right. Students visiting Marcos Nine's work, *Puntos De Autoridade*, in *Atmospheres for Educational Change*. (Photographs by Normal)

It is therefore clear that the exhibition itinerary was sketched from a mid-way point. From Nine's classroom, we projected the location of the remaining proposals. Their position was not strictly defined by a common thread, but only by other spatial requirements: geometry, size, height, and lighting. In the imposition of chaos, the itinerary unfolded irregularly with expressionist angularity and forced diagonals, abruptly shifting from darkness to light and from narrowness to openness, as if it were to be treated with a certain dramatic and pathetic Baroqueism in its emotional appeal. The visitor's mind-body interaction with the installation was necessary for an immersion in the artistic work. This aesthetic experience was fueled by that extravagant exhortation to the emotional, with the architectural space emerging as an important component.



Figures 7 and 8. Left. Exhibition entrance, Atmospheres for Educational Change. Right. Visitors looking through the peephole that marked the beginning of the exhibition. (Photographs by Normal)

Like an introductory letter at the beginning of the tour, a discreet peephole attracted the good voyeur, as proposed by Duchamp in “Étant donnés” (Figure 9). A look back at a remote but still present past, a NO-DO video depicting the inauguration of the Normal center in Franco's era was the detonator of this curatorial project. Quickly forgetting this contradictory reference, the exhibition itinerary welcomed visitors with a narrow and gloomy hallway, with a floor that crumbled as they moved along. These were just soft mattresses hidden under the carpet, a fun and seemingly innocent surprise, but one that was preparing participants to feel, to get emotionally involved in the upcoming installations.

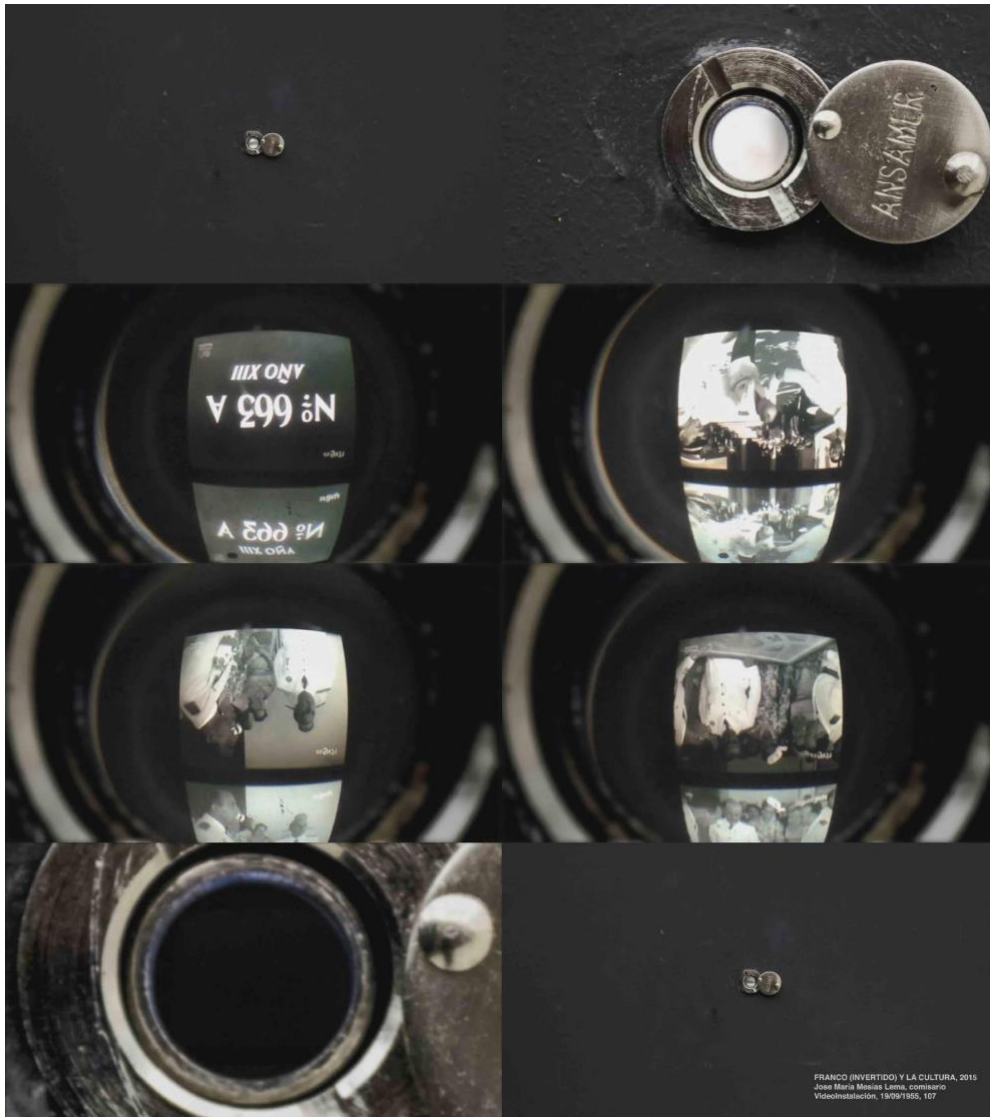


Figure 9. Collage of screenshots of what people could see through the peephole at the beginning of the *Atmospheres* exhibition: *Inverted Franco, NO-DO No. 663*. (Video by Normal, curator). Video available at http://www.ijea.org/v21n6/Franco_NO-DO.mp4

Artist Adrián Crego presented perhaps the most symbolic and thought-provoking installation using five striking GIF projections. This animated format with its unyielding cadence became outlandish in its seemingly large size, such that the floating images surrounded and invaded the audience, conveying subliminal, somewhat ambiguous messages capable of awakening critical consciousness (Figures 10-13).



Figures 10, 11, 12, and 13. Top Left. Adrián López Crego, *HUMONOS*, in *Atmospheres for Educational Change*. Top Right, Bottom Right, Bottom left. Students visiting Adrián López Crego's piece. (Photographs by Normal)

The Alg-a collective, an R+D+i laboratory combining digital and electronic art alongside open and digital culture, introduced an installation where the interaction required a human element, so that only a body could be the link between two plates located on the ground to activate an acoustic response. As a result, the visitor's experience was more bodily than digital. The enclosure—a white box, clean and luminous, virginal—appealed to honesty. In this atmosphere of trust, the most interesting aspect was an invitation to experiment collectively. Although seemingly outdated, it is still considered taboo and uncomfortable to touch those with whom we have no emotional connections. Witnessing schoolchildren participate, we verified these inhibitions—which could hinder attempts to humanize learning—revealing more pressing consequences for our future as a social group. The emotional aspect of this apparently cold and technological installation was its ongoing need for the human component. This experience enabled the audience to move beyond such a crude and candid limitation as a slight tactile contact between unknown bodies (Figures 14-18).

It is not unusual to find interventions or art installations where visitors —especially children— have a passive role. In these kinds of situations, the purpose of artistic expression is just communicating the artists’ opinions to others. We find experimentation is a crucial part of learning: exploring raw materials, our own emotions, sharing feelings. Grube (2015) touches on an important point in this regard when she claims that “children are often underestimated in their ability to take initiative for their own learning” (p. 13).



Figures 14, 15, 16, 17, 18. Top left. ALG-A, C4MARA BRANCA, in Atmospheres for Educational Change. Top right. Students visiting the ALG-A’s piece. Bottom right, center, and left. Students visiting the ALG-A’s piece. (Photographs by Normal)

The installation by artist Amaya González Reyes also claimed a universal value requiring urgent restoration: generosity. Perhaps other values could be construed, such as experiential living through objects and the opportunity of conveyance from one holder to another, but it is the fact of sharing— especially with the altruism displayed by the artist—that caused perplexity in the visitor. This room was conceived as an ambiguous chamber between the domestic and the showcase, where the many objects stood out on a homogenous surface that

tended to disappear in mimicry with the walls. An unexpected value that transcended materiality was generated within the object (Figures 19-20).



Figures 19 and 20. Left. Amaya González-Reyes, *I HOPE YOU LIKE IT* (Actions against Diogenes Syndrome), in *Atmospheres for Educational Change*. Right. Amaya González-Reyes's piece on the day of the inauguration. (Photographs by Normal)

Artist Leo López brought the most intimate proposal, with an atmosphere aimed at recreating solitude, reflection, the need for autonomous thought, and an encounter with oneself under a black light. His scenario, perhaps the most elaborate and authentic, restrained the individual, making them stop, bundle, and retreat into an intense metaphysical relationship (Figures 21-23).



Figures 21, 22, and 23. Leo López García, *The Chapel*, in *Atmospheres for Educational Change*. (Photographs by Normal)

Leo's intimacy was followed by the collective proposal of Julio Falagán, who constructed his artistic claim from the enunciation of collaborative work. The visitor-participant completed an unfinished piece by the artist, a collage, and then exhibited the artwork as a co-author. The representations gave rise to unrestrained freedom of expression, with a tendency towards a socio-political anti-system theme as well as the eschatological, the sexual, delving into unfathomable low instincts. Intentionally, the atmosphere was set with the original furnishings of the Normal center found in storage and a décor that reminisced of NO-DO times. These represented explicit allusions to our current educational place and a time when freedoms were restricted. If art were science, it would imply that, from such feelings of prohibition evoked by the atmosphere, that whirlwind of rebellious expression was the consequence (Figures 24-25).



Figures 24 and 25. Left. Julio Falagán, Producing VS. Reproducing, in Atmospheres for EducationalCchange. Right. Students visiting Julio Falagán's installation. (Photographs by Normal)

Lastly, visual artist Javier Abad enabled visitors to expand, shout, free themselves physically, and get excited. His installation occupied the most spacious area and was filled by hundreds of inflatable balloons, mobile phones that encouraged dancing, and plenty of air to breathe freely. The children's reaction to this enthusiastic atmosphere was predictable. Adults reacted, however, with the same frenzy as children (Figures 26-29).



Figures 26, 27, 28, and 29. Top left. Javier Abad, *LIFE ...MORE LIFE!*, in *Atmospheres for Educational Change*. Top right. Students visiting Javier Abad's piece. Bottom left and right. Students visiting Javier Abad's piece. (Photographs by Normal)

Conclusion

Each of the seven atmospheres worked their concept individually. They were installations created as part of a laboratory of ideas, contingent on the space and the information given by the curator. Seven small artistic experiments connected by the collective, aesthetic, and relational experience with the audience (Irwin & O'Donoghue, 2012; Bresler, 2018). All of them were experienced by students from early childhood, primary, and secondary education. Afterwards, teachers, artists, and students shared reflections about educational change and how they had interpreted and felt each one of the installations.

It was a curatorial project in Artistic Education based on activist pedagogy (Mesias-Lema, 2018). Each atmosphere provoked in the spectator an aesthetic experience through their perception and interaction. The atmospheres, designed for the Normal space art center because it had been a training school for teachers, each generated one sphere of the educational and artistic discourse in relation to the exhibition space.

Political power and its influence over the educational system were challenged from the video at the beginning. This video showed the opening of the *Normal* building by the dictator. Then, as visitors walked across a foam floor—a metaphor of educational uncertainty—the atmospheres by Adrián Crego and Alg-a were interactive, questioning technological development. Nine's atmosphere elicited thought about the authority of teachers and how that authority is used in classrooms through testing. Amaya González Reyes' atmosphere proposed the generosity of sharing knowledge and cultural capital. The need for a slow educational system was suggested by Leo López. As a final culmination, Julio Falagán and Javier Abad offered two ironic, fun, participatory, and pleasant atmospheres.

From the deep understanding of the artists' proposed installations, the architectural environment came to life and became an integral part of the work. The major challenge was to sustain the tortuous journey upon which the project was designed and to mold it to the spatial requirements of each creator, not usually subjected to such complex expository situations. It was also a challenge to maintain the individuality of each atmosphere, avoiding light, sound, and visual pollution, yet without preventing the space from flowing alongside visitors. This was achieved thanks to the continuity and cohesion enabled by the darkness of the performance. The darkness provided a spatial intimacy that gave unity to the independence of each artistic installation and a reflection space for visitors, who interacted with the atmosphere with all the curiosity it aroused.

The atmospheric architecture invited viewers to explore the limits of space in relation to their own body and the educational discourse behind each artistic installation. The presence of the public was not merely perceptive, rather the interaction with the visitor was sought in a performative way. The creation of these atmospheric spaces generated the sensitive activation of all the senses. Through them, visitors were able to make an intellectual interpretation using their previous ideas and cultural baggage. The atmospheres were conceptualized as enablers of a reciprocal relationship between the space and the participants. This experience was intensified through the sensory stimuli offered by each of the atmospheres.

As Horner, Young-Jahangeer & Dhunpath (2016) put it, learning from place aids in “building empathy, compassion for humanity, flexibility, and independent thinking” (p. 212). In the case of this performance, there was a connection with the building's past, the attitudes towards education that were denounced, and each person's background. This bond was created experimentally, by living the exhibition and making it personal. Ultimately, the project had a positive outcome that included intimate work with each artist, with mutual concessions for the benefit of the project. The experience of the journey worked as intended: intriguing, surprising, and revealing emotions that shifted as visitors immersed themselves in each Atmosphere. In the end, it was a captivating and strangely symbolic artistic experience.

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About the Authors

José María Mesías Lema is Associate Professor of Art Education (tenured) at the University of A Coruña-UDC, Spain. He was Vice-Dean of International Relations, Deputy Vice-Rector and Director of Art Cultural Center NORMAL (www.istoenormal.org) in the same University. He is also head of the research group *Artefacto-UDC* (www.arte-facto.org), which focuses on contemporary art processes in diverse educational contexts. He is an activist

educator and a promoter of sensitive learning for the defense of human rights, with a Ph.D. in Visual Arts and Education from the University of Granada. His educational research is based on contemporary art education and visual arts, exploring an activist pedagogical approach to the sensitivity of artistic education and its input in students' lives. It explores the sensitive power of transforming the potential of relational aesthetics in professional training and teachers' development. His latest research generates projects on schools, where inhabitant artists build spaces as experimental laboratories in Art Education.

Tiffany López-Ganet is an architect (University of A Coruña) and Ph.D. candidate in the Arts and Education program at the University of Granada. As a researcher, she focuses on the role of visual arts as a tool for social transformation, with an emphasis on topics such as black identity, afrofeminism, and anti-racism. Using domestic photography and video, she explores her own life-story as a black woman in the diaspora. She is also a member of the research group in Art Education *Artefacto* from the University of A Coruña (www.arte-facto.org)

Guillermo Calviño-Santos is a photographer and digital creator (Polytechnic University of Catalonia). He served as art education professor at the University of Santiago de Compostela (2014-2016) and he is currently teaching at University of A Coruña (since 2017). His research focuses on the potential of visual arts to develop transformative experiences both individually and collectively in the educational context. He is also a member of the research group in Art Education *Artefacto* from the University of A Coruña (www.arte-facto.org)

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