The art of disobedience

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Abstract

The following text intends to reflect on the existence of a paradigm of conflict or disobedience in artistic research practices that confront formal or informal education. The aim is to trace one of the possible directions of what artistic research today can represent for the scientific and social world. The study does not intend to propose a specific didactic method or disciplinary paradigm but rather to open up different artistic methodological possibilities that favour the contradictory moment of solid emancipatory value. In this respect, today’s artistic practices engaged in dialogue with scientific research can be bearers of instances of doubt and the production of critical, collective and contextualised knowledge. I will approach historical experiences of the relationship between artistic research and education from an emancipatory and contingent point of view through the texts of their activators, namely Augusto Boal, Asger Jorn and Joseph Beuys. In the second part of the study, two recent curatorial research projects convey dissident knowledge, such as the Disobedience Archive by Marco Scotini and Radical Pedagogies by Beatriz Colomina. In both of these, the focus will be on how this knowledge is constructed and transmitted.

Keywords: power-knowledge, disobedience, critical knowledge, art-based research, radical pedagogies.

Introduction

The production and transmission of critical knowledge clash with the disciplinary structures of power it performs. Foucault's1 lesson extends to all apparatuses of knowledge, which, rather than preventing the exercise of power, instead create the disciplining infrastructure. The emergence of art-based educational and research practices accentuates the conflict between neoliberal educational and research policies and the idea that art is a powerful change agent. On the one hand, the former tend to harness critical knowledge and practices through standardised creativity2, standardisation of behaviour and verification of results. On the other hand, art is looking for a free space for involvement and real confrontation with the issues of contemporary society, where it can escape the logic and forms of the institutionalised and financialised system.

From a properly epistemological point of view, this ever-living tension between the determination of a power-knowledge and its transgression can represent one of the most significant contributions that research with or through art can offer to the scientific and educational apparatus1.

Instead of disciplining research legitimations in terms of style, formality, or originality, it is possible to assume a perspective—perhaps a paradigm—of conflict both historically and geographically.

As the artist and theorist Hito Steyerl4 states, a conflict perspective makes it possible to define a map that does not privilege the great urban centres of cultural production but touches on so-called peripheral regions and isolated realities, where oppression exercises. Thus, genealogically one can speak of research through art when moments of crisis, revolutionary, refounding have

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occurred. Imaginary geography, therefore, emerges as a product of hybridisation between everyday resistance practices and the global instances of history. Instead of confining art to a disciplinary point of view, a conflict map delegates its research activities in terms of contingency and emancipation. By contingency is meant a processuality that moves from the concatenation of theoretical assumptions and practical experimentation so that one aspect informs the other and vice versa. The production of such knowledge is thus hic et nunc, i.e. accidental and contextual because it arises from the activation of the reality of cases. The validation of such knowledge occurs extemporaneously with its production, in the form in which the actors involved share it, and a network of relations emerges. In this way, instead of tracing different cases back to an epistemology of research, many epistemologies are affirmed as the questions that drive the study. Emancipation for Jacques Rancière is the prerequisite for equality, i.e. the fact that everyone enjoys the same capacity to offer an intelligent response to a book, a performance, a work of art. Rather than suppressing the mediating object favouring a communal immediacy, the third term is fundamental so that all parties can refer to it and translate it with the means of their language. The distance that this third term imposes is the essential precondition of all communication.

In the first part of this text, I will present three cases of artistic research initiated in the 1960s and still influential in the contemporary world. Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, Jorn's Imaginist and later Situationist Movement and Beuys' Free University are experiences that question existing educational models through collective practices that include new subjectivities and refounding spaces in which to imagine new institutional forms. I will recount these experiences through manifestos of intentions that these artists elaborated in conjunction with the realisation of their practices. My purpose is to trace some similarities starting from the definitions of contingency and emancipation. In the second part, I will consider two contemporary art projects: the Disobedience Archive, initiated by curator and art critic Marco Scotini in 2005 and Radical Pedagogies, created by architectural historian Beatriz Colomina in 2013. Starting from how archives get virtually narrated, the focus will be on transmitting and exposing conflictual, radical, and disobedient knowledge within educational and artistic institutions.

**Education as art practice**

In the 1960s, in Brazil, Augusto Boal started a participatory theatre-based practice of popular education within the peasant and working-class communities. The Theatre of the Oppressed was born in 1970 to develop a tool capable of acting towards social change. Inspired by Paulo Freire's lesson in "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed", Boal asserts that there are no pre-established ways to solve a conflict situation, but instead of suffering it, people can explore it through discussion and action. Emancipation passes through individual and collective liberation paths triggered by critical observation, stressing the representation of reality and imagining concrete steps. The exercises and games that Boal developed over the years are numerous, such as the Theatre of the Newspaper, a set of techniques that allow people to experience communication through images and space instead of words. The image, linked to the non-verbal, allows a knowledge that goes beyond the conscious mind's control, overcomes defences and repressions, and helps to free the imagination. Forum Theatre is a staged situation of oppression that the protagonist is unable to fight. The participants take it in turns to play the role and invent strategies of defence and

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11 [https://imaginaction.org/media/our-methods/theatre-of-the-oppressed-2](https://imaginaction.org/media/our-methods/theatre-of-the-oppressed-2)
resistance. According to the techniques of The Theatre of the Law, these considerations can become a draft law when the participants subsequently gather. Boal’s artistic research method is at the same time global and specific: the model and the techniques can apply in every place where a situation of an individual or collective conflict occurs, and yet they are open to the contextual problematic and therefore able to put the group in the condition to find its specific answers. In these terms, Boal bases his pedagogical method on the concatenation of a conceptual model constituted by the body of exercises and techniques, with the adaptation to a specific context, innervating itself in the discoveries that this produces and restoring solutions and new practices that can be useful also for other cases of conflict. From an emancipatory point of view, Boal’s goal is liberation by constructing a space of non-verbal dialogue between oppressed and oppressors. Theatre allows acting on the border between representation and reality, activating a path of conscientisation and empowerment in which participants act both as spectators and actors, stimulated by a conductor who problematises the case but is not a leader, claiming equality and decision-making power.

The artist Asger Jorn wrote the manifesto of the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus founded in 1956 in Alba, Italy. Jorn claimed that artistic research, described as “concerned” science, had the same possibilities as scientific research. An institution capable of promoting this research cannot be instructive or didactic but must offer new opportunities for experimentation. Jorn thus distanced himself from the educational model of the old Bauhaus, writing how it answered the question “What kind of ‘education’ do artists need to take their place in the machine age?” The International Movement for the Imaginist Bauhaus represents the “answer to the question of where and how to find a justified place for artists in the machine age.” The great Bauhaus artists based their teaching on repetition and imitation of their work. For Jorn, however, the transfer of artistic qualities is not direct but occurs through a series of inevitably conflicting phases such as shock, wonder, imitation, rejection, experimentation, and possession. The manifesto concludes that people should abandon all efforts of pedagogical action in favour of experimental activity. The manifesto would later merge with another entitled “Art and the Popular University”, in which Jorn deepened his antidisciplinary vision to the point of even imagining a Department of Destruction. For Jorn, the emancipation of artistic research lies in the possibility of freeing oneself from the obligations of dogmatism and the search for truth. For the artist, grasping the present means learning the contradiction in the things of the world, rather than seeking truth in repetition, as promoted at the basis of scientific education. It is, therefore, necessary for there to be an anti-professional and anti-intellectual activity, autonomous, but at the same time in continuous collaboration with society and intellectuals. Since only the amateur can go beyond his previous knowledge and unpredictably approach understanding, the artist is for Jorn a professional amateur, and the popular university is the institutional model to follow because it is anti-didactic and anti-professional. The Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus co-founded Situationist International in 1957, whose program consisted in creating spatial, eventual, and collective situations of deliberately playful activity. These situations are practices of resistance to the individual’s alienation from his environment, moments of liberation from the functionalism of the modern city, and the construction of a new society. Play, freedom of use of the territory, drifting, psychogeography, a preference for indeterminate urban spaces were all aspects that, according to the Situationists and Jorn, could reunite the individual with the city. Therefore, integral artistic research practice is a set of those free manifestations of the reappropriation of the collective with the surrounding space. The movement would grow and develop throughout the 1960s, spreading to all the major European universities until it emerged in the desire for change among young people in May 1968.

In 1973 Josef Beuys founded the Free International School of Creativity and


14 Ibidem, p. 12.

Interdisciplinary Research with Nobel Prize winner Heinrich Böll. In the early 1960s, the artist was Professor of Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf; in 1967, he founded the Student Party and, in 1971, the Organisation for Direct Democracy through Referendums. For Beuys, teaching became an integral part of his work, and the artist set out to develop new educational methods that would broaden the concept of art as much as possible. He considered all living beings to be artists in nature and thought that the discriminating factor between those who asserted themselves as such and those who did not was the educational model and the institution that conveyed it. "Creativity is not limited to people practising one of the traditional art forms, and even artists shouldn't restrict creativity to the exercise of their art. Each of us has a creative potential overshadowed by competitiveness and the aggression of success. To recognise, to explore this potential is the purpose of school." By appealing to free culture, Beuys was not referring to artists' work but the renewal of educational methods and specifically to the university. The pedagogical role that Beuys was activating did not initially find fertile ground to take root, so much so that he got dismissed, albeit temporarily, from the Kunsthakademie Düsseldorf. The following year, the Free International University opened its doors to everyone with no limits to accessibility and intending to pursue the integration of the education system while raising its critical issues and suggesting equality: "The school is based on the principle of interaction, whereby no institutional distinction is drawn between the teachers and the taught. The school's activity will be accessible to the public, and it will conduct its work in the public eye. Its open and international character will be constantly reinforced by exhibitions and events in keeping with the concept of creativity." Beuys expressed his intentions by expounding the idea of social sculpture in the university's founding manifesto, also by Böll. Creation implies not only artistic and musical techniques, or the use of talent and imagination, "but also the ability to model material that could be extended to other socially relevant spheres." The pedagogical model was that of a permanent conference to help realise all individuals' capacity to be creative beings by supporting the transmission and hybridisation of ideas between specialist disciplines and between informal knowledge, such as that of the housewife or the farmer. The overcoming of the distinction between professionals and amateurs means the interaction between social resources as a way of liberation and promotion of democratic potential. "The FIU aims to go beyond sterile action, turning its attention to education, the economy and the defence of nature. It was set up as a meeting place for different people who reflect on contemporary reality, seeking to pool their energies in creating concrete models and alternative proposals." Various people and groups pursued the idea of the Free International University, including the author Rainer Rappmann under the FIU-Verlag and the FIU in Amsterdam, Hamburg, and Munich, initiated by Beuys' students. Also included are the organisation Mehr Demokratie e.V. and the Omnibus for Direct Democracy.

Learning to disobey

The Disobedience Archive was born with the idea of creating a travelling exhibition composed of ephemeral and circulating materials such as videos and graphics. Disobedience is recounted here in terms of media strategies, starting with Alberto Grifi, who filmed the protests at Parco Lambro in Milan in 1976. Grifi asked the protesters to take the camera, including their point of view in the representation of the event. The Disobedience Archive thus represents a collection of heterogeneous artistic practices of dissidence, "it can be seen as a manual for media tactics against oppression." According to Marco Scotini, an action of dissidence is not to be understood simply as the refusal of a pre-established disciplining knowledge but presupposes a new demand, alternative planning. It is a founding act of a space of freedom with a high emancipatory value to fulfil with unexpected imaginaries and

17 Ibidem, p. 16.
18 http://www.social-sculpture.org/free-international-university-fiu/
19 Lucrezia De Domizio Durini. op. cit., p. 18.
20 Ibidem, p. 18.
new subjectivities not yet represented. Assuming conflict as opposed to normative modes of participation means experimenting with a practice of micropolitical intervention capable of dissolving the role of the spectator into a new living category to build new relationships and thus new social realities capable of emancipating themselves and determining their political reality. Over time, the archive became a platform for the continuous collection of these materials and the exhibition practice and participatory discussions activate the relationship between art and politics. Each time the archive takes exhibition form, it is inserted into the context, collaborating with local institutions and artists, reconfiguring the display and adding new sections, materials and compendia. The archive covers forty years of disobedience as told by the artists. It includes several sections: "1977 The Exit from Italy", "Protesting against Capitalist Globalisation", "Reclaiming the Streets", "Bioreistance and Controlling Societies", "Argentina Fabrica Social", "Disobedience East", "Disobedience University", "Gender Politics", "Arab Dissent" and finally "Gezi Commune" and "University of Disobedience". The latter's introduction is a significant question "In the end, is it not within educational processes rather than within wage labour organisations that new forms of social antagonism have taken shape since the 1970s?". The curator argues that the educational principle itself reiterates the relationship of subordination between those who command and those who obey, and it is precisely this law of legitimation of authority that the disobedient do not accept. Making disobedience a social paradigm in the contemporary world means not seeing or exhibiting it but taking it on as "a toolbox to be used". Among the films archived in the "Disobedience University" section is Trauma 1 - 11: Stories about the Copenhagen Free University and the surrounding society in the last ten years from 2011 in which Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen, in collaboration with Emma Hedtitch, Howard Slater and Anthony Davies narrate their journey through the period 2001-2011 in and around the Copenhagen Free University in a narrative way through an audio game for acts. The University was born as a space for research, knowledge sharing, critical consciousness and poetic language within a small flat in Copenhagen. *Itgaber, He will Overcome* is a 1993 documentary by Eyal Sivan in which the artist interviews the Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz on the topics of science and value, the state and the law: "The honest man must know that he must never respect the law too closely". Professor Y. Leibovitz, spiritual leader of the Israeli soldiers who refuse to perform national military service in the occupied territories, who has always been very attached to divine law, develops a provocative stance towards the state in general and power in particular. *What is 16 Beaver?* of 2003 tells the story of the space run by artists at the address 16 Beaver, in lower Manhattan. The activity started in 1999 as a commonplace to share research, questions, understandings, concerns and struggles in a "permanent conference" that relates the most pressing social, political, artistic, philosophical issues within the structure of every day and where some people are "regulars" and involved on a day-to-day basis, others come and go as they please. The agreement remains open to anyone interested. The 2011 film *Prototypes. Claremont*, *Listening Session for Twelve Sound Objects*, 2011, is the work of the anti-AIDS activist collective Ultra-red, which, along with many other collaborations, develops a practice of militant listening by gathering people around a common experience of listening to a demonstration, a simple walk in the neighbourhood, an emancipatory or political struggle. The group's accounts of the experience become "songs of pain". *Facts of Life/Inarchive*, 2009, by Silvia Maglioni and Graeme Thomson, is a film between fiction, documentary, essay and video art, based on footage of courses held by Deleuze at Vincennes University in the 1970s. The artists seek out the students who took part in the philosopher's seminar by broadcasting the original material on an old monitor while filming the students' attitudes and behaviour. These have never been edited or incorporated into an official archive, and their existence in some ways reflects Deleuze's pedagogy on the fringes of official philosophy, engaged with Guattari in an open process of constructing the concepts that

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24 Ibidem, p. 22.

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constitute the main components of their great philosophical war machine, *Mille plateaux*.

**Radical pedagogies**

The research project *Radical Pedagogies*, conducted by Beatriz Colomina with a group of PhD students from the School of Architecture at Princeton University, brings together more than 90 experiences of educational experimentation in architecture that have challenged the *status quo* of the discipline since the Second World War, influencing the transformation of the landscape, but also of institutions and politics. Many of the cases collected are extemporaneous experiences, while others survive longer because they are related or in conjunction with national or supranational emancipation movements. The archive does not reveal one protagonist above the others, but rather a dense network of activities that refer to each other with the aim of an educational and political liberation, capable of shaking society as a whole. As Colomina says, "The pedagogy of architecture has always been a political act" because it is a communal space where reflection and action bounce off each other. So pedagogical experimentation in the arts itself is to be considered an artistic or architectural practice. The radicality lies precisely in this contingency between the ideological model and its contextual and immediate experimentation and the disciplinary openness to social and economic processes and interaction with the community. These cases report the upheavals concerning curricula, polytechnics, and the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student. Although several cases reported in the *Radical Pedagogies* project represent institutionalised practices in both the educational and creative sectors, many other experiences remain disturbing or utopian even today. Again, the research project is structured to come to life through conferences and seminars and in exhibition form. The exhibition *Radical Pedagogies: Reconstructing Architectural Education* was presented at the Warsaw Under Construction Festival in 2015, the 14th Venice Architecture Triennial in 2013. The exhibitions are interactive platforms consisting of ephemeral materials and prints that the visitor can collect. The exhibition phase is a driving force for the progressive implementation of the archive with new experiences and documents. To date, the mapping covers a global dimension, conceived with the intention of "seeing and discussing the resonances and dissonances between these experiments" everywhere. Online, the relationships between political dissent and the pedagogy of architecture emerge through the form of a virtual archive, in which each radical experience get recounted through a sheet, stock images and possible interviews with the protagonists. In addition, a map facilitates a geographical view of all the experiences, and a search engine allows the selection of cases according to various key concepts.

Searching under the keyword "collective learning," the experience of *The Women's School of Planning and Architecture WSPA* of St. Joseph's College in Biddeford ME, the USA between 1975-1981 appears. The experimental summer school was born from the union of several feminist instances emerging from some architecture schools to build a network of support for the minority representation of women at the time and yet open to any woman regardless of background. Each of the four sessions that characterised this experience took place in different locations in the United States to facilitate accessibility. Among the topics covered were personal transformation and social change, inclusivity, and the role a female architect could play in the emancipation of women's lives. Under "collective creativity," the workshops of Anna and Lawrence Halprin, dancer and landscape architect respectively, held in the Bay Area, California, the USA between 1966-1971. The participants, who came from various disciplines, including dance, sociology and architecture, were involved in group creative actions about nature. *The Experiments in Environment* were pedagogical experiments that pursued "ways of learning through exploration and direct experience" of the environment, tools for collective creativity through which people

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27 Ibidem, p. 25.

28 [https://radical-pedagogies.com](https://radical-pedagogies.com)

would understand the city as a space for social action. Jim Burns, summer workshop member and editor of Progressive Architecture, reports: "Young women and men undress on an outdoor deck, oil and massage each other, bathe and move through the mountain forest together. Trying to create their community, a group of young people live through the agonies and happiness and involvement that go with environmental creation". Under the heading "collective experiment"30 is the Analogous City, a collective and international project from 1976 initiated by Aldo Rossi at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale in Zurich where he taught. The work consisted of a large, constantly expanding collage, created together with the students by assembling architecture images. The unconventional use of architectural representation and the juxtaposition of styles were part of Rossi's pedagogical proposal to his students and reflected the architect's idea of architecture as a whole. The collage, made by photocopies of books of history of art and architecture, was assembled at night in the Institute of History and Theory of Architecture spaces, thus embodying "both the pedagogical and the iconic value"31.

Conclusion

I have worked along two interconnected lines, searching for a paradigm of conflict that can open up a space for an accurate comparison between contemporary educational and scientific models and art-based research projects. On the one hand, genealogically, I wanted to trace some possible characteristics of this paradigm, such as emancipation and contingency, in some historical artistic-educational experiences in the 1960s. On the other hand, I described two projects regarding contemporary artistic research, both in the form of a virtual archive, which aims to transmit dissident artistic and educational practices. The experiences of the Theatre of the Oppressed, the Imaginist and then Situationist Movement, and the Free University share the idea of a non-hierarchical pedagogy extended to society. The artists propose to take on conflict as opposed to traditional educational methods, starting from confrontation and discussion, liberating exercises, and communication practices between the different components of society. These experiments build up a micropolitical interventional practice capable of dissolving the oppressed, whether or not they are students, into a new living category to build new relationships and, therefore, new social realities capable of emancipating themselves and determining their political validity32. I considered these experiences because, although historicised and linked to the context of the 1960s, they have spread seminally over several latitudes and have come to influence many of today's artistic and educational practices. The two curatorial research projects recently launched address radical or dissident artistic practices with a documentary slant. The choice of the archival form is emblematic, and in this text, I have experimented with the use of both archives by selecting a personal research path from the proposed materials. In both cases, virtual archives get activated by exhibitions and moments of actual interaction with a participating public; an involvement manifested in the characteristics of the displays adopted each time. This interaction displays the geographical context in which the archives temporarily exist and with an active public of students or interested parties produces new contingent critical knowledge regarding the emancipatory possibilities of contemporaneity. This crucial knowledge becomes part of the archive.

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**Biographical note**

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