

CUMMA (CURATING, MANAGING AND MEDIATING ART) IS A TWO-YEAR, MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME AT AALTO UNIVERSITY FOCUSING ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS PUBLICS. AALTO UNIVERSITY IS LOCATED IN HELSINKI AND ESPOO IN FINLAND.

PARA-SITES
FOLLOWING
IN THE
FOOTSTEPS
OF FREIRE
INTERVIEW
WITH JANNA
GRAHAM

BY EVA FORSMAN, NINA SUNI,
ULLA TAIPALE, HEIDY TIITS,
ANNUKKA VÄHÄSÖYRINKI
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Though radical education in art galleries has already been going on for some decades, it only became fashionable in the art world and mainstream galleries at the beginning of the 21st century, as part of the so-called Educational Turn.

Janna Graham is one of the pioneers of so-called radical gallery education. She has been working and “para-siting” at various art institutions in Canada and the UK as an educator, researcher and curator, engaging communities, neighbours and artists to carry out Possible Studies, and other social-justice and art-related projects.

Graham has been especially influenced by *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by the Brazilian pedagogue and theorist Paulo Freire. In it he suggests that social-justice-related cultural projects can be called radical education only when the “oppressed” can take part in the dialogue and engage in meaningful action.

In this interview Janna Graham shares her experience and insight into critical consciousness, or *conscientização*, and popular-education work in the context of art institutions. She describes a situation in which radical education has to negotiate the hierarchical and author-oriented paradigms of the arts in relation to the interests of communities in struggle. In spite of the Educational Turn, as she describes it, radical-education projects involving artists, curators and gallery educators and communities are still very often marginalized, both economically and in terms of general support; the further one moves away from artistic stardom, the greater the possibility of this marginalization occurring.

JANNA GRAHAM, YOU HAVE WORKED AND PUBLISHED ABOUT GALLERY EDUCATION AS A RADICAL PRACTICE AND DESCRIBED RADICAL GALLERY EDUCATORS WORKING IN INSTITUTIONS AS PARA-SITES. WHERE DO YOU POSITION YOURSELF IN THE FIELD? AND DO YOU SEE YOURSELF AS SUCH A PARA-SITE?

Well, first, I should say that I don't think that gallery education is necessarily a radical practice. There are many kinds of gallery education, some deeply colonial and instrumentalizing, others radical, and many others somewhere in between. I position myself as someone trying to be a radical educator who also works in galleries. But I also position myself regularly outside of galleries as well. Among this kind of work is my participation in a group called the *Radical Education Forum* in London, which brings together teachers from many different contexts—from anarchist movements to primary schools. During the struggles against austerity measures in education in the UK, we have been involved in a number of protests and occupations and taught about radical education practices in those contexts. We do not see ourselves as radicals necessarily, but use the term “radical” to distinguish our commitments from the coercive aims of neoliberal education. This is the same as what it means to be a “radical” gallery educator, which is about using my position in galleries to work against oppression at the hands of neoliberal governance. This radical position is not then outside of neoliberalism, but working within its conditions to find this ‘outside’. This is why I sometimes use the word parasite to describe it. In fact, I borrowed the term from other radical educators with whom I have worked on projects, who often joke that they are para-siting mainstream institutions to enable their radical work. Like ‘radical’, ‘para-site’ indicates a collective fight against conditions within the neoliberal institutions upon which we are dependent.

HOW DID YOU BECOME INTERESTED AND ENGAGED IN THE RADICAL EDUCATIONAL TURN?

Hmmm. I'm not sure that the educational turn is necessarily a radical educational turn. To answer this, I can describe how I came into radical education, and then how I experienced the so-called 'educational turn'—which were really quite separate. My experiences in education, politics and indeed para-siting began in the 1990s as an undergraduate student in Canada, when I was recruited into the struggle of an indigenous group called AAFNA (Ardoch Algonquin First Nation and Allies), who were fighting with the Canadian government for land and aboriginal status. We used resources from the university to engage in collective action, using video and self-reflexive and self-education processes. 'We' were a mix of students, indigenous and non-indigenous people working across many generations, who were learning about art and education in the process of struggle. Later on, I continued with the things I learned from this experience and the questions it provoked, this time at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, developing a youth program with other young people in the city, using the gallery to address issues including the policing of young people (and particularly young people of colour). During this time, I took courses at the Catalyst Centre, a popular education training and publishing space in the city, where I encountered social-justice activists from Latin America and elsewhere, and was more formally introduced to radical education histories and practices.

In the years before I came to the UK to do my PhD in 2006, artists and curators in Toronto started to read the book *Relational Aesthetics* by Nicolas Bourriaud. Perhaps out of frustration with this text, but also its naming of a practice that artists were increasingly engaged in, people started to talk more about participatory art processes, and from there to pedagogy, reading other texts, Grant Kester's *Conversational Pieces*, Rancière's *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, and, later still, the work of Paulo Freire. These readings were accompanied by a few projects, which took the form or titling of 'the school', 'the study group' etc. Prior to that, the mainstream art world, in my experience of it, had not seemed particularly interested in education—radical or otherwise—which was relegated to the basement of most cultural institutions, in spite of the fact that many artists worked as educators. In the UK my PhD supervisor, Irit Rogoff, wrote a text on this tendency—one in which she was actively engaged in producing exhibitions and events—describing it as the 'educational turn'. Through Irit, I became involved in some of the projects and writing associated with this turn.

For myself and others who had been involved in education work in the arts for a long time, it was quite strange to watch this interest take hold and to understand what it brought to our work. On the one hand, it allowed us to gain more ground. We could tell directors and funders that the work was not only important in communities, but

also in the art world. It gave us a little bit more room to experiment beyond traditional approaches and spaces. At the same time, it created some confusion, as many projects, while adopting the language of radical education and forms like the free school, were not organized around the principles of long-term commitment to social change and communities that characterize most radical education projects that I've been involved in over the years. They were a lot shorter, sexier and less clear in terms of commitments and consequences. Understanding how to use this turn to gain leverage, but not to fall into a more superficial approach, has been a central challenge.

In this turn it was also interesting to see who was invited to the conversation. There were very few gallery educators, and even fewer associated with community or school-based education. This produced hierarchies between different practitioners, and highlighted the differences between an art world that works on principles of selection and gallery education, which typically has had a less authorial and more collaborative approach. Many gallery educators know they will never be stars, and understand themselves as being in a different kind of spectrum with different kinds of goals, which are not about individual ego or practice. However, some of the critical discussions afforded by the 'educational turn' were welcome in re-focusing of conversation amongst gallery educators, which I had found frustrating, as they were often overly focused on their/our own institutional marginalization, blinding practitioners to some of their own complicit alignment with neoliberal education agendas.

Interestingly, there was also a turn going on at that moment in the social movements I was a part of. This turn was a response to the exhaustion from the experiences of the antiglobalization movement in the late 1990s, characterized by big international meetings and spectacular protests. People were looking for ways to engage in struggle on a more local level, and how to involve wider constituencies in the fight against neoliberal policies, and looking to radical pedagogy as a way to understand community-organizing processes in this longer trajectory.

In the UK this turn was also related to the austerity measures that threatened (and subsequently succeeded) to triple tuition fees, and remove the allowance that enabled working class students to participate in higher education. This educational turn involved occupying, schools and art colleges, squatting big mansions in the centre of London, and turning them into free schools and workshops on radical-education histories.

There were times when all of these turns overlapped, and times when they remained very separate.

LET'S COME BACK TO THE SERPENTINE GALLERY IN LONDON. THERE, YOU FOUNDED THE CENTRE FOR POSSIBLE STUDIES. WHAT ARE POSSIBLE STUDIES? WHAT DOES THE CENTRE DO IN PRACTICE, AND HOW DOES IT BRING FORWARD NEW PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES?

The possible study is a very situated concept/practice, and was developed through the work that myself and others have done in the Edgware Road neighbourhood, where I started working in 2008. The project began through the Serpentine Gallery's past projects in the area, on the back of which they had raised funds to engage in community projects and artistic residencies. Through the Serpentine's history on the Edgware Road, there were already existing long-term relationships with community members. When I began working at the Serpentine, I met with a number of these people and others locally, and together we developed the idea for a space that could be useful to the people in the neighbourhood, and programmes where artists could provide tools and work in solidarity with different struggles in the community.

The idea of the 'possible study' came from the initial research that we were doing in the neighbourhood, meeting with different people who were in struggle against the gentrification of the area. People were talking about all the studies that had been done about them by the Council and local developers. These studies were geared toward constructing the 'need' for gentrification, and seemed impossible to penetrate. They said what the council needed them to say. In the meantime, many study groups were meeting in the area to discuss things that were of interest to people who lived and worked there. The 'possible study' was a response to this. It was a call to listen out for the possible, but also a commitment to learning what other possibilities existed for the area.

Through the space that we created, called the Centre for Possible Studies, people make these possible studies in a few ways. One kind of study is curated in that we work with artists and community groups to develop co-research projects. While being collaborative, these are often artist driven. Other studies have been developed by community groups, who use our facilities quite independently. As an example of the latter, x:talk, a local sex-worker organization, used the centre as a base for five years to organize their activities, such as language courses and independent research on the impact of police policies on sex workers. They also used the relationship with us to 'study' how to gain stronger financial support for their organization. That study was quite successful, as they are now independent and have their own self-organized space. x:talk were important in infusing an ethos of radical community self-organization into the space. Other projects—usually very short-term residencies—were strictly about artistic investigation. Through them we learned about projects that the communities and artists were involved in in other spaces. We have engaged in less of these, as they risk being touristic.

Most of the possible studies have drawn from histories of radical or self-education in the area. The creation of the Centre for Possible Studies itself was based on the community arts movement developed in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s, through which artistic equipment and resources were offered in working class neighbourhoods, and to those engaged in social struggle, like the miners. In the 1970s, there were hundreds of these spaces and projects—all government funded. Nowadays there are some spaces left in London, but not many, and the government has been depleting funding from grassroots projects and putting it into the big mainstream cultural institutions like the Serpentine.

People have, at times, asked us to go and ‘do’ the Centre for Possible Studies elsewhere, but the Centre is very tightly tied to the particular Edgware Road community. Of course, it is possible to use similar methods of radical education and community-based art practices to help people engaged with social struggles elsewhere, and many have in the past. We do our best to support others in doing this, but we could not claim to be doing anything very new, as there are many grassroots groups who have been using these strategies for many years.

IN ONE OF YOUR TEXTS YOU REFER TO “THE ARTIST” AS A CO-EDUCATOR OR CO-RESEARCHER. I WAS WONDERING, WOULD YOU IMAGINE ANY ARTIST TAKING PART IN THIS KIND OF WORKING AND LEARNING-TOGETHER PROCESS, OR IS THERE A CERTAIN TYPE OF ARTIST THAT WOULD BE MORE INTERESTED IN BEING INVOLVED?

Answering this question has been a really important learning process for us in the project. In the beginning, we were very conscious to invite artists who we knew were committed to social justice, or had supported a community in a struggle. CAMP had done that—they run their own media space in Bombay in India, where they have worked in solidarity with different groups, such as cable operators. They had a lot of experience of working with communities and building infrastructures with them. They understood that their position was not neutral and, as a result, spent a lot of time analysing the politics of the area with co-researchers who worked in the shops and restaurants. Together they decided to produce an archive of migrant histories that could be used in the struggle of these shops against the forms of social and cultural cleansing that were being proposed.

This approach is quite important, because in the UK many projects that are about the social take on the language of charity and are very colonial. In gallery education, this can also be the case. What is very clear from both this project and the studies developed

by x:talk is that there is a difference between helping (what x:talk and other sex workers call the 'rescue industry') and working in solidarity. This knowledge and experience of solidarity work has continued to be important. We were very keen that the neighbourhood not be a kind of playground for artists—or that people become simply 'material' for an artist's work. Once or twice—because the Serpentine Gallery was funding the project—others at the gallery were involved in selecting the artists. In those cases we worked with artists more famous on the biennial circuit, who appeared to have a social background, but did not fulfil this solidarity brief. Those projects were a bit disastrous, as it was clear that community members were there to fulfil their artwork, not to have their own needs, interests and desires.

Historically, at the Serpentine, there had been a strategic reason to engage with such artists. Sally Tallant, who developed the original Serpentine projects in the Edgware Road area, was an advocate of this approach of working with well-known artists who had little background in social engagement. For her, it brought more profile to socially engaged work in the art world and reduced the marginalization of social-art projects. Hers was about half a generation before mine and, at that time, it was critical to bridge gallery education and contemporary art commissioning, so that the gallery would understand the importance of this kind of work. The language through which 'they' (the broader arts community) could understand and value the work was that of artistic stardom.

My experience has been that, even with artists who have commitments to a solidarity-based approach, there have been very intense learning processes. We ran a free cinema school over the course of our first summer, in which local people were invited to use 8mm and Super 8 cameras to make mini-films about the area, as part of a democratic process of defining issues. The school was developed by the London-based collective no.w.here, and Hollywood actors Khalid Abdalla and Cressida Trew, who all had past relationships to the Edgware Road. In that process hierarchies kept asserting themselves, and this was the basis for many group discussions and, indeed, the question of how to share power in a cultural process became the very heart of the 'possible study'. These discussions were further explored when Khalid and Cressida went on to develop a collaborative cinema and activist project during the occupation of Tahir Square, called Mosireen.

While it has become clear through this and other studies that there is a lot of work to do to unlearn some of the authorial tendencies of the art world, the more we have moved towards this collaborative and ethical approach, and away from artistic stardom, the more marginalized we have become economically and in terms of the general support from the gallery. This marginalization has had tremendous benefits in some ways, where in others it has put us in a very precarious situation.

THE INCREASING INTEREST IN RELATIONAL AND PEDAGOGICAL EVENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF MAINSTREAM ART DISCOURSE AND BIG CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS CREATES THE POSSIBILITY FOR CRITICAL SPACES IN AN OTHERWISE NEOLIBERAL CONTEXT. WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS THROUGH WHICH THESE CRITICAL SPACES CAN EXIST?

The neoliberalization of cultural institutions has created a sea of contradictions. In the UK, movements like the community-arts and radical-theatre movements of the 1970s and 1980s were taken up by cultural institutions, at the encouragement of the Arts Council. In the 1980s, as galleries were opening up, so too were they introduced to Thatcher's move towards the privatization of the arts and the involvement of corporations. The Serpentine is the prime example of the outcome of this contradictory landscape, and was congratulated as a model by the current conservative government, who are interested in this very neoliberal mix of private interests and programmes geared towards communities. That was in some ways the enabling condition for the Centre for Possible Studies, but because the ideology of privatization is not the only ideology that is present in this neoliberal mix, there is a little crack that can be used to create something else that is critical, and this something can be shared with others outside of the art context. There are limits to what can be achieved here, but as such spaces still receive a significant chunk of funding from the tax base, they are places in which some semblance of power-sharing can and should take place. I do not have a utopian perspective on this, and think that in the given situation these moments of occupying the cracks are unlikely to result in the full redistribution of power and resources. However, the contradictions can sometimes be leveraged to open us spaces to build power towards more autonomous forms of organizing or to provide examples for other models of how cultural institutions could operate.

AND, ON THE OTHER HAND, ISN'T THIS INTEREST FROM BIG CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS ALSO PART OF A NEOLIBERAL INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF ART AS PEDAGOGY OR AS A SIMULACRUM OF SOCIAL JUSTICE?

There are so many layers of instrumentalization. It exists in terms of the brand of the host organizations: the Centre for Possible Studies is absolutely part of the Serpentine Gallery's brand machine. There are other quite obvious forms of instrumentalization, i.e. the presentation and making a spectacle of education or activist projects that people

like Brian Holmes have written about. And then there are all of the ways the arts, and increasingly gallery education, are instrumentalized in terms of social and corporate policies, such as those involved with gentrification processes, policing, or the rescue industry I described earlier.

But there are also the ways that community and activist groups instrumentalize galleries to make gains for their work. I have been asking the different groups who occupied the Centre for Possible Studies to what extent they felt instrumentalized by the experience. The artists who have been involved are very angry at the gallery, and say that they felt its presence all the time, not as a direct instrumentalization, but they were very aware of the power imbalances between their participation in projects and those of artists in the exhibition programmes. Non-artists had a range of responses: from not knowing anything about the gallery (as we almost always worked off site), to using it mischievously as the basis for a parody of broader social disparities, to a transitional space from which to gain symbolic and monetary capital before moving on to more autonomous endeavours, as was the case with x:talk. It is important to recognize that there is not only one way that instrumentalization occurs. What has been important to us is the development of processes for reflection with those involved in the project, to collectively weigh what is gained for local struggles against what is lost in these instrumentalizations, and to keep the question of continuity an open one, so as not to be trapped in ethical compromises that reach beyond the limits that we are able to tolerate for ourselves. This kind of analysis is done on a case by case basis.

IF YOU COMPARE PROJECTS DONE IN BIG CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS WITH THOSE DONE IN GRASSROOTS SPACES, WHAT POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE FEATURES CAN YOU IDENTIFY IN EACH CONTEXT?

In big cultural institutions there tend to be more resources: space, money, symbolic capital. This means that people involved in projects can be paid, and this is quite crucial when working with artists and other people who could not afford to participate without some degree of compensation. In the UK there is also a real fear of strangers, amongst schools and other social service organizations, which makes it difficult to engage these spaces without institutional backing. And, where some autonomous centres have a very specific focus and provide a meeting place for activists, they are not always meeting points for different cross-sections of society. There is the potential that drawing public funding from cultural institutions can facilitate a more intersectional approach.

However, even if re-distributed, these resources do not belong to the people working

on the projects when the cultural institution—like the Serpentine—is organized hierarchically and beholden to bourgeois and corporate social elites. Until this changes, resources can't be as freely distributed or managed as they can within grassroots or more autonomous groups. This is why I think that the best they can do is to: a) build power towards autonomy; or to b) build prototypes for how galleries could be organized otherwise, and push for them to be adopted.

IN THE TEXT "BETWEEN A PEDAGOGICAL TURN AND HARD PLACE: THINKING WITH CONDITIONS" YOU POINT OUT THAT THE AUTONOMY OF THE ARTIST IS AT STAKE TODAY. IN THE SAME ARTICLE YOU ALSO TALK ABOUT THE PRODUCTION OF CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE PRODUCTION OF CRITICAL CONSEQUENCE. CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR THOUGHTS ON THESE TOPICS?

In that article I was describing a situation in which the autonomy of the artist gets confused with political autonomy. Artistic autonomy can be quite dangerous, and what neoliberal forces are counting on, i.e. that the artist will not become deeply embedded in political issues or support political struggle in the contexts in which they are engaged. That the artist and/or curator will be detached from the social world by virtue of their own interest and ideas—what Bourdieu calls the artist's 'interest in disinterest'—is very beneficial to those who wish to use the arts to put a shine on socially re-gressive processes, like kicking people out of their homes. In London one goes to many discussions on political issues in the art world where discussants and host organizations are detached from the movements and issues brought into debate. As a cultural organization in the Edgware Road neighbourhood, we get invited to a lot of unofficial ("secret") meetings about the future of the area. Grassroots movements are not invited or involved, but we, as an arts organization, are. It is on the basis of this perceived artistic autonomy that we are there. It makes us useful to the development process, and this is not something to be celebrated.

Political autonomy, on the other hand, is this process of moving towards less manipulative and more collectively determined use of the means of producing and reproducing life. Political autonomy is not about separation, but a deep and critical inhabitation of conditions, using them as the basis for a struggle for liberation.

In the article I am arguing that artists should align with others in the name of this political autonomy, instead of with their own autonomy, driven solely by artistic desires and interests.

AS WE LOOKED INTO THE CONCEPT AND THE HISTORY OF RADICALIZATION OF EDUCATION IN OUR CLASS, WE READ PART OF PAULO FREIRE'S *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED*. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF FREIRE? DO YOU SEE A RELATION BETWEEN HIS WORK AND TODAY'S PARTICIPATORY TRENDS IN EDUCATION?

For me Freire's work has been very important, because of the trajectory of my own learning in popular education at the Catalyst Centre in Toronto, which was very influenced by educators from places like El Salvador and Nicaragua, who in turn drew heavily from Freire. Within Ultra-red, the collective that I have worked with over the past decade, we have focused quite a lot of our attention on Chapter Three of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It is where Freire lays out something of a methodology (though he'd hate that characterization) for collaborative research or investigation, involving communities and people working in solidarity with them. This chapter forms the basis for many groups engaged in popular grassroots organizing. It also provides a really important insight into the role and timing of aesthetic practices in political processes, as it does not do away with representational practices, but suggests that they take place within trajectories of collective synthesis and analysis of conditions of oppression. He describes this process as one of codification/de-codification. This has been important for my own understanding of how to re-orient mechanisms of artistic production towards liberatory struggle.

Over the last years, I have also been investigating feminist histories of organizing, anarchist education, workers pedagogy, and the radical schools initiated within the civil-rights and anti-colonial movements.

It's been very important when working with these histories to really probe the degree to which they are useful today. Like the practices of participatory arts, many of the techniques and languages of radical education have been incorporated into neoliberal managerial culture. They are used to perpetuate processes of exploitation, displacement, and the ongoing war against the poor and disenfranchised in the world. So one cannot trust when one hears Freire's name, nor words like oppression, liberation or participation. Freire gives some instruction on this in his writing on dialogue, in which he suggests that speaking about or even through political concepts or techniques without the clear intention to engage in liberatory action is indeed no dialogue at all. This kind of talking, or use of terms without the intent to act, he says, 'is akin to an alienating blah, blah, blah'. Radical education reduced to a technique, language or format outside of a process of enacting change upon the conditions of oppression is not really radical education at all. Looking at what process and conditions these kinds of techniques are used within is really important in distinguishing between pseudo-democratic processes of 'consultation', like those enacted in urban development, and the struggles of people attempting to fight these same oppressive tendencies. There is no pure strategy or technique here, only the terrain of a struggle over terms and histories.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE BEST WAY TO USE FREIRE'S TECHNIQUES, AND COULD THEY EVEN BE USED AS TOOLS FOR REVOLUTION?

This is an interesting question. Freire himself felt that the pedagogy of the oppressed was a pre-revolutionary strategy, and was about the creation of the critical consciousness required to choose and formulate revolutionary struggle. But, in El Salvador, they used radical approaches to literacy teaching within the revolutionary context of armed struggle. Not having lived through a revolution of that scale, in my experience the most beneficial way to use these strategies is in the analysis of conditions of power, both as they exist as forces working to oppress groups, but also as oppressive tendencies within groups who are in the process of organizing against their oppressors. Freire and other popular educators also suggest another crucial practice: that of naming the conflict. This is especially useful in the confusing doublespeak landscape of neoliberalism, where conflicts are often glossed for the sake of expediency (and coercion). This act of naming is both very helpful in clarifying when a process is honestly attempting to engage in liberatory action and when it is not, but also very much in terms of group formation. There is an energy to the act of collectively naming the terms and contradictions of one's oppression, just as there is in organizing the conditions to work against them.

Where Freire and others are more difficult to follow is on how we move from these acts of naming into critical, revolutionary action. This difficulty is partially to do with the time in which we are living, in which heroes and enemies can be quite tied into one another, and in which we are sometimes the managers of our own oppression. We can get stuck in deciding to whom our actions should be addressed. There are not always ready answers here, but there is a joy and trust in the process of moving towards revolution that can be taken from these writings and the experience of putting them into practice.

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CUMMA PAPERS #12

*Para-site - following in the
footsteps of Freire
Interview with Janna Graham by
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