

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.

Nora
Sternfeld
Learning
Unlearning

What does the mediation of art mean? This question has often been discussed without coming to any definitive answer.¹ And that is probably a good thing. I would like to begin by clarifying the German term “*Vermittlung*” from in between languages. Within international debates, since documenta 12 the term has frequently been translated into English as “mediation.” Those working in the field within German-speaking contexts began using “*Kunstvermittlung*” (the mediation of art) to describe their work in the 1990s. At that time, it represented a new way of imagining the future of the profession and a more current term for *Museumpädagogik* (museum pedagogy), which seemed not only outmoded but endowed with little symbolic capital from the start. However, directly translating *Kunstvermittlung* as “art mediation” leaves out an important point, as it fails to consider the German prefix “*ver-*”, which is also found in “*verlernen*” (unlearning), in Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*

¹ “What is Cultural Mediation?” *Time For Cultural Mediation. An Online Publication*. Institute for Art Education of Zurich University of the Arts (ed.), n.d. 2016. [Web](#).

(estrangement effect), in *verlieben* (falling in love), and in *versprechen* (to promise or literally misspeak). This nuance is often overlooked, which unfortunately also leads to a number of assumptions both in how the term is understood in its everyday use in the German-speaking context, and more especially in its translation. One of these common assumptions is that what is to be “mediated” is concrete, pre-existing and clearly summarisable. This, in turn, implies that the person mediating has previous knowledge about what is to be conveyed, and that it is indeed possible to impart this knowledge in a precise and clear manner to another person who

“One of these common assumptions is that what is to be ‘mediated’ is concrete, pre-existing and clearly summarisable.”

did not yet have this knowledge. This also implies that knowledge transfers are more or less frictionless and they only go in one direction. Understanding processes of knowledge production in this way fails to consider that a block in communication may occur, or that it might flow in two or more directions. This makes it an inadequate term for speaking about the processes and deconstructive moments that make up a substantial part of *Kunstvermittlung*, which have been an integral part of the discourses since

late 1980s and 1990s.² Taking the “*ver-*” in *ver-mitteln* seriously means challenging the notion that mediation is inherently unidirectional or consensus-oriented, which opens up the possibility to critically reflect upon what is being conveyed in the first place. Following this, *vermitteln* not only conveys, but also reflects on, or even unsettles knowledge.

In postcolonial theory, unlearning dominant knowledge has been repeatedly discussed as an important practice for challenging the value-encoding apparatus from inside the structure of knowledge production. Conceiving of the mediation of art in this manner enables us to think beyond the social division between the production and reproduction of knowledge. The generative power of the mediation of art therefore lies in rejecting the assumption that a seamless transfer of values and truths is possible. At this point, one could argue that splitting hairs about a prefix is not a strong enough argument to completely redefine the term and its everyday use. I agree, which is maybe a good thing too, because here—at the latest—my intention is clear: I do not aim to come up with the final definition for the mediation of art, but instead I begin by looking at the way it is commonly understood and work towards a vision of what it could become. Here, in the midst of *Kunst-ver-mittlung*, I am interested in opening up a space for dissidence, for the possibility for the unexpected to happen. In this text I do so by taking a closer look at the concept of unlearning.

² Cf. Sturm, Eva. *Im Engpaß der Worte: Sprechen Über Moderne Und Zeitgenössische Kunst*. Berlin: Reimer, 1996. Print.

First Blockade –Unlearning Learning

It is difficult to imagine unlearning. One thing that stands in our way is our initial understanding of the word. Is it even possible to simply leave dominant knowledge behind? My immediate answer is “no” for two reasons. First, there is no way back. There is no path that leads us to a time or place before the history of relations of power and violence that are responsible for what we know today. Secondly, unlearning is not an easy task. For this reason, it is worth taking a closer look at how it is discussed in postcolonial theory. Before we can directly proceed to unlearning, we first have to understand that learning is the result of hegemonic relations. Understanding this enables us to reflect

on the knowledge and skills we have learned. Before doing that, however, I suggest taking a (de)tour into art education via the following art intervention.

The location is Tel Aviv at the corner of Rothschild and Allenby Street on 16 August, 2011. The crossing is blocked. The political art performance *How Long Is Now?*³ by the artist collective Public Movement is blocking the crossing with a particular folk dance.⁴ The popular circle dance *Od Lo Ahavti Dai*⁵ is from the 1970s and is widely known in Israel. It is a group dance that evokes the strength and hope of building a Jewish state, and is taught to children early on in kindergarten. The intervention blocks traffic for the duration of the dance, which is two and a half minutes. The occupation of the crossing re-appropriates a familiar choreography and enacts a bodily knowledge of the dance that is specific to Israel. Although the onlookers might be surprised that the action is taking place there, the dance is nonetheless familiar to them, and because they know it by heart, they could even join in if they felt like it. What scene is unfolding here? Because the courage and energy of the dance is suddenly and unavoidably employed in both an unexpected and unintended manner, the blockade

³ SchwarzesNossen. “How Long Is Now?” *YouTube*. YouTube, 17 Aug. 2011. [Web](#).

⁴ I am indebted to Oliver Marchart for pointing out the relationship between learning and unlearning in Public Movement’s performances. See Marchart, Oliver. “Dancing Politics. Political Reflections on Choreography, Dance and Protest.” Stefan Hölscher and Philipp Schulte (eds.) *Dance, Politics & Co-Immunity. Current Perspectives on Politics and Communities in the Arts*, Zürich/Berlin: Diaphanes 2013, 41-60, esp. 56-57. Print. Also: Marchart, Oliver. “Art, Dance and Political Intervention.” Artistic, Cultural and Political Practice Conference. Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, Amsterdam. 27 Mar. 2013. Lecture.

⁵ The lyrics of ‘Od Lo Ahavti Dai’ (1977) were written by Naomi Shemer. The simple choreography is by Yankele Levy. The English translation is “I have not loved enough” and is not only a tale of two people in love, but also of the pioneers’ love for building the state of Israel. Among other things, Naomi Shemer is acclaimed as having written the “soundtrack of the Jewish people”. Oliver Marchart elaborates on Public Movement’s re-appropriation of the song in the following: “To understand this intervention, one has to know that the Israeli folk dance does not in the slightest emerge from an age-old tradition. Of course, round dances belong to the cultural heritage of the Mediterranean region and South Eastern Europe. Yet, modern Israeli folk dance has its roots in the 1940s when the Israelis were forced to create a new, synthetic culture for heterogeneous groups of immigrants. For this purpose, Israeli folk dance did not only integrate choreographic elements of highly diverse traditions, it also became very much part of popular music production. Every new Israeli pop hit is immediately outfitted with

creates awareness and makes it possible to reflect upon something previously taken as simply familiar and self-evident. Blocking the crossing prompts the people who see it to acknowledge that they know the dance. Why does it seem familiar? How and when did they learn it? What function did learning the dance serve, and what role has this collective choreography played in Israeli society? Therefore, knowing and recognising the dance evokes the boundaries between the individual and one's collective learning processes. Which kind of learning, which conscious/unconscious, individual/collective forms of knowledge make this dance familiar? The fact that these and other questions are raised allows us to understand that it is not only a street crossing that has been blocked. It also makes apparent that the familiarity with and the ability to perform the dance is something that is both collective and learned. The action thereby deconstructs and simultaneously actively re-appropriates learned bodily knowledge of the nation.

This example shows that learning does not simply mean acquiring a set of knowledge and skills, but

to some effect, that we also perform existing power relations. We study them by making use of this knowledge and passing it on and, in turn, we are also able to use this knowledge to question

“Learning is both a discursive and performative praxis”

and turn power relations around. Antonio Gramsci sums up the relationship between power and education⁶ as “every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship [...]”⁷ Gramsci, an organic intellectual and part of the Italian Communist Party since the 1930s, clearly states that the fact that power relations are the way that they are cannot solely be attributed to economics

a choreography that is then passed on in dance classes. Thus, folk dance in Israel has nothing to do with *Brauchtum* (tradition), as the appalling German term goes, but it is better described as an enormous multiplication of fashion dances. Among these hundreds of songs, ‘Od Lo Ahavti Dai’, has proven to be one of the most popular ones. It is probably because every Israeli child learns the choreography in kindergarten that *Public Movement* chose the song. In this sense, Israel’s state choreography is expressed through communal dancing and registered by the bodily knowledge of its citizens. Because it is universal (and individual) knowledge, every person passing by can potentially join in and become part of the circle. By using this dance in order to block the crossing, a dance symbolising the communitarian closure of society (but also, of course, the attempt to gain courage and solidarity within a fundamentally hostile environment) is re-appropriated and used to disrupt the public order of this very society.” Ibid, p. 56.

⁶ Antonio Gramsci developed a political understanding by drawing on the history of the progressive education movement with its

radical politicisation during the 1920s. As an activist, “organic intellectual” involved in the communist movement in Italy, journalist and speaker at worker’s organisations, and Marxist theorist incarcerated for many years in a fascist prison, Gramsci develops a kind of political thought that is strongly indebted to pondering the question of pedagogical relations. When Gramsci speaks of education/instruction, he largely refers to them politically in terms of the formation (*Bildung*) of hegemony (of education (*Erziehung*) as an instrument that secures hegemony) or the formation (*Bildung*) of opposition (of education as a weapon in counter-hegemonic organisation).

⁷ Gramsci, Antonio, and David Forgacs. *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*. New York: New York UP, 2000. p. 348. Print.

and discipline, as power relations are also learned. Learning is therefore both a discursive and performative praxis. We learn what appears to be important and unimportant, how to order and differentiate things, and what belongs together and what does not.

In relation to this, Paul Mecheril speaks of “racism in places of education”⁸ and points out that the formative/educational function of racism is that it creates order/structures. He looks at the natio-ethno-cultural” orders/structures of belonging that differentiate and position persons in ways that ascribe them different values of recognition and possibilities for acting. He pairs this with the question of how education plays a part in (re-) producing this order, and which possibilities exist and can be developed in order to change and undermine this order.”⁹

The knowledge we learn creates difference and also entails a corporeal dimension. We learn to move through the world “as men”, “as women”, “as citizens”. We also learn who “we” are, who “the others” are—and through everything that we learn—we learn there is still a lot we do not learn. We also learn that not all knowledge equals power (and that ignorance and stupidity are even considered an asset or essential for some forms of power). We learn which knowledge brings power and what we are not supposed to know in the first place. We

learn, for instance, that some languages are less important than others. With this, we learn to accept, for instance, that someone who speaks seven African and three European languages may still not be considered “educated,” and we are therefore less surprised when their permit is denied, or that they do not feel at home anywhere.

In line with this, Black activist and theorist Araba Evelyn Johnston-Arthur writes: “school and especially the classroom have been ingrained in my memory as intensely contentious sites that are extremely challenging in terms of self-assertion. By self-assertion I mean the assertion of the multiple layers of one’s own isolated Black Self inside what I am able to identify today as a stark white space.”¹⁰ A consequence of this for learning institutions that are situated in heterogeneous societies yet still largely base their education on monocultural (read: white, western, national, dominant culture-based) curricula, is that certain forms of knowledge are always considered more valid than others within

⁸ Cf . Mecheril, Paul. “Rassismus als Bildungsraum”. Part of the lecture series *Kollektives Widerstandslernen organisieren* (Organising collective forms of resistance) by Petja Dimitrova, Eva Egermann and Nora Sternfeld. Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna. 5 May, 2008. Lecture.

⁹ Author’s translation. Mecheril, Paul, Castro Varela María Do Mar, İnci Dirim, Annita Kalpaka, and Claus Melter. “Migrationspädagogik. Hinführung Zu Einer Perspektive.

“*Migrationspädagogik*. Weinheim: Beltz Verlag, 2010. p. 7–22, esp. 15. Print.

¹⁰ Johnston-Arthur, Araba Evelyn. “Jenseits von Integration... Überlegungen zur Dekolonisierung des österreichischen Klassenzimmers.” Eva Egermann, Anna Pritz (Eds.), *class works. Weiter Beiträge zu vermittelnder, künstlerischer und forschender Praxis*, Vienna 2009. p. 113–137, esp. 119.

learning situations, and that a lack of knowledge in some situations may even be considered beneficial. On this topic, cultural and education worker Rubia Salgado writes: “It is not enough to reflect upon the alleged/conscious/unconscious knowledge about migrants,

“Power is not only based on knowledge, but also on conscious and profitable ignorance”

it is also necessary to take a closer look at the absent knowledge about migrants. This would lead teachers to engage with the ‘privileged distance’ they have, compared to the reality of the migrants learning in their classroom. This privileged distance allows the teachers to refrain from receiving knowledge from or about the learners.”¹¹

¹¹ Salgado, Rubia. “Aufrisse Zur Reflexivität.” *Kunstvermittlung in Der Migrationsgesellschaft Reflexionen Einer Arbeitstagung–2011*. Stuttgart: Ifa, 2012. p. 53–56, 57. Print.

¹² “If traditional teaching addresses forms of ignorance deemed unacceptable, then postcolonial pedagogy addresses those forms of “sanctioned ignorance” that are often rewarded and may exist everywhere, including among “the theoretical elite”. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999.

This has been discussed in: do Mar Castro Varela, María and Nikita Dhawan. “Breaking the Rules. Education and Post-colonialism.” Carmen

We learn to speak, write, calculate, put things in order, and how to deal with everything else that comes along with this. In this way, power is not only based on knowledge, but also on conscious and profitable ignorance. In postcolonial theory, this powerful knowledge about the other and its associated power of ignorance, or “socially-rewarded sanctioned ignorance,”¹² is called “epistemic violence.”¹³ This is when violence itself lies within knowledge, in the orders and distinctions it creates, in its blind spots. Because these processes remain shielded from view within these seemingly self-evident orders, it is extremely important to find ways to question the things we have learned to hold as self-evident. In this respect, when we have a clear understanding of the connection between power relations and learning processes, we can also see that these things were not always the way they are, and do not necessarily have to be this way. We can change them by learning differently.¹⁴

Mörsch et al. (ed.), *documenta 12 education. Between Cultural Praxis and Public Service Results of a Research Project*. Zurich: Diaphanes, 2009. p. 317–332, esp. 327.

¹³ Post-colonial theory and post-colonial activism are not *solely* concerned with the square metres of occupied territory or the millions of exploited, massacred, and subjugated people in these lands; rather, they also explore how colonialism was equally an intellectual and cultural phenomenon that led to the emergence of Europe and its Other. do Mar Castro Varela, María and Nikita Dhawan. “Breaking the Rules. Education and Post-colonialism.” Carmen Mörsch et al. (ed.), *documenta 12 education. Between Cultural Praxis and Public Service Results of a Research Project*. Zurich: Diaphanes, 2009. p. 317–332, esp. 320.

¹⁴ Cf. Peter Mayo. *Gramsci, Freire and Adult Education: Possibilities for Transformative Action*. London: Zed Books, 1999. Print.

Second Blockade –Learning Unlearning

From both a teaching and learning perspective, engaging with power relations in order to change them is, as Gayatri Spivak puts it, an equally unglamorous and necessary task for current critical educational practices. Spivak considers ‘unlearning’ from the perspective of postcolonial theory, updating Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. For her, “unlearning” describes the process of actively interrogating the powerful divisions and always-already known power relations—specifically from the site *of the periphery*.¹⁵

Concerning this, María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan write:

“Post-colonial pedagogy problematises the ‘learned ignorance’ and complicity with imperialist and nationalist projects implicit in most educational programs. This, according to

Cherokee activist and artist Jimmie Durham, necessarily calls for a ‘positive destruction.’ Thus, looking forward will only be possible by virtue of a simultaneous orientation toward the here-and-now and the past. Those who want to learn how to build a future need to address the violence at the root of how they came to be who they are. How did we become those who we now believe ourselves to be? Which position do we occupy in the world? And at whose expense?”¹⁶

If we take these questions seriously, much of this ignorance would no longer seem profitable, or would even be somewhat embarrassing. This example clearly shows that unlearning is not solely a reflective process. Actively unlearning racism, sexism and other powerful epistemological forms of discrimination not only entails becoming aware of them and understanding their inherent binary logic, but also entails what can perhaps better be described using Foucault’s words as “the revolt of subjugated knowledges.”¹⁷

By this Foucault means that these epistemological struggles challenge the canon and its violent exclusions by expanding and shifting it around. According to Spivak, this happens when and because “the oppressed no longer remain silent and the academic canon is irritated by deconstructionist and feminist readings.”¹⁸

¹⁵ I learned a lot about this working with Araba Evelyn Johnston-Arthur and the Research Group for Black Austrian History.

Cf. Evelyn Johnston-Arthur, Araba in “Jenseits von Integration ... Überlegungen zur Dekolonialisierung des österreichischen Klassenzimmers.” Eva Egermann and Anna Pritz (eds.) *class works*. Vienna: Löcker, 2009, p. 118.

¹⁶ do Mar Castro Varela, María and Nikita Dhawan. “Breaking the Rules. Education and

Post-colonialism.” Carmen Mörsch et al. (ed.), *documenta 12 education. Between Cultural Praxis and Public Service Results of a Research Project*. Zurich: Diaphanes, 2009. p. 317–332, esp. 324.

¹⁷ Foucault, Michel. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France (1977-1978)* trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Picador, 2007.

¹⁸ Author’s translation. do Mar Castro Varela, María. “Verlernen und die Strategie des unsichtbaren Ausbesserns.” *Bildung und postkoloniale Kritik*.

If such contestations of the canon are understood as organic intellectual practice in Antonio Gramsci's sense, then unlearning does not primarily focus on the individual's processes of unlearning. It does moralise for the sake of creating shame around using expressions of racism and sexism, which might lead a person to vow to never utter such words again. However it is indeed dangerous to approach dominant constructions of power and value ascriptions solely on an individual level. Despite this, there are a number of anti-discriminatory

“If we are to take unlearning seriously, we must also ask ourselves what education might look like if it was not based on ‘the pretense that the world is an idyllic place where everyone is tolerant and lives together in peace and harmony’”

approaches in education that personalise social phenomena and in turn make it impossible to analyse the real relations of power and dominance. Even in educational programs that set out to create awareness and shed light on the problems of discriminatory concepts and logics, discussions are often limited to speaking about them on a personal level. While individualised approaches may deconstruct identity, they also unfortunately reify identity constructions and thereby conceal the social, political and economic structures that form the material basis of these constructions. Because they hinge on the personal, that is, on each individual's commitment to creating a better way of living together, they foreclose openings for discussing the role of racist legislation, deportation regulations and mechanisms of exclusion. Given this, it is crucial that we examine if pedagogical concepts are not being misused. They claim to be capable of providing simple solutions to

discrimination, but it becomes evident upon a more critical assessment that they cannot in fact be resolved within education alone. This problem, however, is intrinsic to education because it is always oriented towards individuals and does not have any real means of organising politically. If we are to take unlearning seriously, we must also ask ourselves what education might look like if it was not based on “the pretense that the world is an idyllic place where everyone is tolerant and lives together in peace and harmony.”¹⁹ Which leads us to inquire what might happen if the debates would focus on (rather than conceal) the actual political circumstances, the sexist conditions, heteronormative self-images, homo- and transphobic normalities, and racist structures? When we speak of unlearning, we are certainly not referring to a way of finding personal solutions, but about approaches that critically assess social relations. This critique is formulated in solidarity and/or from the perspective of *knowledges* that speak back to the canon because they are not acknowledged by, are oppressed by, or excluded from it to begin with. In *Teaching Community*, bell hooks clearly argues that political learning that counters

¹⁹ Author's translation. Paseka, Angelika. “Gesellschaft und pädagogische Praxis.” *Dekonstruktive Pädagogik. Erziehungswissenschaftliche Debatten unter poststrukturalistischen Perspektiven*. Opladen: Leske Budrich, 2001. p. 187–199, esp. 196. Print.

racism always takes place through and with others, that is, it is a collective work on “shared knowledges.”²⁰ hooks explains that this work has nothing to do with morals, but rather with making a decision (for or against the given power relations) and, as a collective practice, it is also linked to struggles and strife as much as it is to love, passion and hope.

To further complicate matters, I would now like to introduce a few thoughts related to making a decision using Freire’s approach that is “tactically situated within and strategically outside the system.”²¹ Freire starts from the premise that there is no such thing as a “neutral” upbringing/education: education is always political—it either fortifies the existing relations or creates openings for change. Peter Mayo, who writes on both Gramsci and Freire, summarises this with a simple question that all political education must ask itself: “what side are we on when teach, educate and act?”²² In the preface to the German translation of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Ernst Lange puts this in a nutshell:

“There is no other education than political education. The more apolitical education believes itself to be, the more risk there is for it to become politically effective and stabilise dominant power relations. Educators rarely ask themselves if they are acting politically or if their acts will have a political effect. The only question that matters is: for whom and on whose behalf are they working politically: those of the oppressor, or those of the oppressed?”²³

Although, at first glance, asking which side are we on may appear merely binary or to simplify the issue, it still evokes a number of other questions, such as: how do we know that we are on the side of the oppressed? Are we always on that side? Do we always want to be? Who are we? Who is still excluded? Who do we think we are when we are aware of

“The only question that matters is: for whom and on whose behalf are they working politically: those of the oppressor, or those of the oppressed?”

this? And, of course, if we are already implicated in these relations, what can we do to bring about some form of radical change? These questions show how complicated the decision is as soon as it is made. In order for the decision to be complicated, I suggest here, it must first be made. Only then is it possible to make these contradictions Freire discusses productive. Even in moments when we seem to be caught up in the degradations of everyday life inside the

²⁰ hooks, bell. *Teaching Community. A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.

²¹ Author’s translation. Mayo, Peter. *Poltische Bildung bei Antonio Gramsci und Paulo Freire. Perspektiven einer veränderenden Praxis*. Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 2006, p. 21. Print.

²² Ibid.

²³ Author’s translation. Lange, Ernst. “Einführung.” *Pädagogik der Unterdrückten*. Hamburg: Reinbek, 1973, p. 17. Print.

system—and even in moments when we can hardly imagine a form of pedagogy capable of changing and not stabilising these power relations—spaces of agency still open where political work becomes possible. When this happens, we recognise that power structures are not one-dimensional blocks, but fields of contention where learning and teaching also become “terrains of struggle”. Grasping education as a practice that can bring about change means that we must also consider ways to negotiate and transform the sayable and thinkable, challenging “dominant ways of thinking and acting within the vast and amorphous arenas of struggle within civil society.”²⁴

“We must consider ways to negotiate and transform the sayable and thinkable”

Actively working to shift and transform the canon using reflective approaches of unlearning also involves a performative dimension. It not only has to do with ideology critique, but also with going through the slow—sometimes strenuous and painful, other times invigorating and exciting—processes of transgression and unlearning the certainties we have been

trained to embody that also convey power relations. In this sense, unlearning is also an exercise where we slowly, gradually break with learned practices and habits of making difference based on dominant power relations that are already inscribed in our habits, bodies and actions. This is indeed an incredibly difficult task, which is also riddled with uncertainties. To illustrate this further, I would like to introduce another blockade. In front of the Habima Theater in Tel Aviv, the artist collective Public Movement is practicing the Dabke, an Arabic folk circle dance. Many of the dancers have obvious difficulties with some of the dance steps.²⁵ At first glance, this public dance rehearsal, along with the Israeli performers’ missteps and difficulties, may seem similar to the aforementioned intervention. The difference is that in the first action, knowledge of the dance was taken for granted. Because the Israeli performers have no practice or intrinsic bodily knowledge of the Dabke, they first need to learn it. Being able to dance the Hora is not necessarily helpful, it even stands in the way—and part of this public process of learning this new dance is also unlearning the dance they already know.

Similar to Butler’s use of “undoing” in “undoing gender,”²⁶ unlearning is a form of performative counter-learning that stands in contrast to dominant performative learning. Imagine we have now learned these dance steps, which are saturated with relations of power and violence. How can we problematise them, yet still perform the dance? How can we dance and simultaneously unlearn dance, and therefore learn to dance differently? Such questions also apply to thinking—with the help of

²⁴ Author’s translation. Mayo, Peter. *Poltische Bildung bei Antonio Gramsci und Paulo Freire. Perspektiven einer veränderenden Praxis*. Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 2006, p. 22. Print.

²⁵ SchwarzesNossen. “Dabke Rehearsal in Front of Habima.” *YouTube*. Public Movement, 22 Sept. 2011. 23 Aug. 2016. [Web](#).

²⁶ Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Butler we can conceive of both dance and thinking as performative acts. Theoretical work—when understood as a practice—is perhaps nothing more than working to unlearn one’s own blind spots and presuppositions based on dominant power relations. In this vein, Irit Rogoff opens her text entitled “What Is a Theorist?” with the words “A theorist is one who has been undone by theory.”²⁷

I will now address the misunderstandings previously mentioned. First, unlearning does not function like a delete button, erasing powerful truths, histories of domination and the way these are produced. That would be absurd and probably even support the logic of the powerful discourses, because they believe that they can simply ignore history whenever it suits them. Besides this, Spivak’s “unlearning” is not merely interested in finding ways to avoid hegemony, but instead in formulating counter-hegemonic processes. Unlearning therefore neither involves imagining going back to a time before the current power relations were in place, nor a clear-cut correction process. It is not about working through histories of violence in an effort to leave them behind, but about creating different politics of history and a different kind of

remembering. It is about naming and thereby socially transforming histories of violence and spaces of agency created by resistance and struggles for liberation. In this sense, it is a form of learning that actively rejects dominant, privileged, exclusionary and violent forms of knowledge and acting which we still often understand as education and knowledge. Sometimes it is also about the desire to suspend these for a moment, or the decision to take the time to do so. Even if unlearning is not exactly the act of ridding oneself of previous knowledge, it is still related to the slow and strenuous processes of our everyday struggle with the canon.²⁸ Spivak describes this kind of learning as an act of weaving invisible threads into the already existing texture. Unlearning therefore does not simply involve a disavowal of the histories of violence. It can certainly be a lengthy and tedious, though promising process, because it makes it possible for us to analyse and transform powerful forms of knowledge and patterns of action, even if it is one small step at a time.

CuMMA PAPERS #20
Learning Unlearning
By Nora Sternfeld

EDITORS: Nora Sternfeld and Marko Karo
EDITORIAL WORK: Katie Lenanton and Darja Zaitsev
PROOFREADING: Katie Lenanton
TRANSLATION: Erika Doucette
GRAPHIC DESIGN: Darja Zaitsev

DEPARTMENT OF ART
AALTO UNIVERSITY
Helsinki 2016

²⁷ Rogoff, Irit. “What Is a Theorist?” *The State of Art Criticism*. New York: Routledge, 2007. p. 97–109. Print.

²⁸ Cf. Sternfeld, Nora. “Unglamorous tasks: What Can Education Learn from its Political Traditions?” *e-flux Journal* #14. Mar. 2010. [e-flux](#).