Transnational tomorrows today:

Graduate student futures and imaginaries for art education

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Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

IRAN

A TRANSNATIONAL READING JOURNEY: OUR COLLABORATIVE REFLECTION ON NEGOTIATING OF POWER STRUCTURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the result of an ongoing conversation among Iranian art educators, students, artists, and researchers, and it forms part of our compendium in this special issue. We have attempted to keep the format of the article dialectic to reflect the depth of our engagement and dedication to the conversations. The methodological approach is experimental, in the way that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1994) proposed 'to think is to experiment, but experimentation is always that which is in the process of coming about - the new, remarkable, and interesting' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 111). Conversations, oral delivery and comprehension have a long history in Iranian culture, and this socio-cultural feature has thus had a great impact on the formation of this collaboration as a conversation, and on the resulting format of this paper.

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OUR CONVERSATION

The subject of our conversation was a critical transnational reading of English articles. In other words, we have let our 'sociological imagination shape [our] methodological thinking and practices' (Koro-Ljungberg & Knight 2019). We also intended to approach this paper as a conversational event and to use these conversations to 'explore and articulate personal and collective narratives of resistance in relation to dominant discourses and metanarratives' (Norris & Sawyer 2016: 1).

For this project, we selected three articles: 'Free' by Irit Rogoff (2010), 'Un-What?' by Jacques Rancière (2016), and 'What is Philosophy?' by Deleuze and Guattari (1994). We all read the articles in English, tried to translate and interpret them, and contribute our own understanding of the texts to our collective conversation. We believe that our conversational response not only methodologically targets the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in terms of accessibility by adopting oral conversations as a source for the creation of knowledge, but expands on notions of language to encourage how we can become part of wider conversations. This opening created an opportunity for our group of local art educators, artists, and researchers to be part of a global conversation about art education in new ways. In addition, the subject of our conversations - universities and the production of knowledge - is aligned with the SDGs. As Prieto-Jiménez et al. (2021) have clarified, there is a need to change the culture of "higher education institutions in order to achieve sustainable universities ... and key to this is the development of transferable innovative experiences" (p. 3). In this sense, this transnational reading of articles can also be considered an experimental innovative practice.

NEGAR: The interesting point for me in the readings was the process of translating the words. I was not able to find an equivalent in Persian for some of the words, and those words remain unknown and undefined. This was a challenge that I confronted constantly.

MOZHGAN: I agree with Negar. For instance, the phrase 'unframed knowledge' (Rogoff 2010: 1) can be interpreted in two ways, because when a word is prefixed with 'un', it can either negate the word or reconstruct its

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meaning. For example, for me there are two meanings for the word 'unbreak': one is something that cannot be broken, and the second is something that has been broken and repaired. Therefore, we can explain 'unframed knowledge' in two ways: One is a knowledge that deconstructs the construction, and the second is a knowledge that is rebuilding or reconstructing itself. Regarding this matter, the author distinguishes gaining knowledge from gaining education, raising the question, am I an educated person or a person with knowledge? Are these the same? And considering the phrase 'unframed knowledge', how free am I, within the framework of the university, to grow and to gain knowledge?

SIAVASH: Maybe we can rephrase your questions and ask these two questions: What is the difference between gaining knowledge and education? And to what extent has our knowledge been acquired within the academic framework and structure?

It seems that universities inevitably impose an internal structure and framework onto education which dissociates individuals from the freedom to gain knowledge. In fact, there is a paradox in which the knowledge-based institutions attempt to administrate freedom for individuals by educating them, but also distance them from freedom by means of their framework and structure. Although this lack of freedom has not been constructed intentionally, the way in which knowledge is transferred and organized imposes this situation.

In order to benefit from the knowledge, one must refer to these institutions, but the structure of them deprives one of freedom and individuality. This is against the nature of knowledge that Rogoff mentions, because one gathers knowledge to increase one's freedom, and to live with a more open mind.

We also confront another two questions: To what extent are education and knowledge related? And how much freedom did you experience in the process of learning knowledge during your education?

NEGAR: In the field of education, I was not allowed to make any mistakes or experiment with anything new, particularly in academia. To do so is bold

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even in a field of study like art, and anyone who studies or even teaches in this field understands this. Although the skills taught in these institutions cannot be denied - for example, the three-year course of conservatory education I undertook during high school had a great impact on my learning journey and professional career.

SABA: I believe that each person's lived experience also affects their apprehension of knowledge and the freedom which they experience in universities, and so we cannot separate one's lived experience from one's education. For instance, I have never considered my university studies to be completely fruitless. It was me who decided what I was taught, in order to grasp what was meaningful and leave aside what was pointless to me.

SARA: Teachers also have a great impact on the realization of this process. The professors I had at the university never pushed me in a specific direction, but always guided me on my trajectory of learning. Individuals themselves and the decisions they make play a pivotal role. In my opinion, not all people who study at universities experience freedom and the reception of knowledge in the same way.

MOZGHAN: In response to Sara's point, I would say that the university does not allow you to learn something outside of the university's framework and structure, and so in this way it guides you along a pre-determined learning path. Universities set a three-month period for a student to complete a course; students are expected to be present in the class at a specific hour and if someone intends to complete the work over a period longer than that or return to the university at the end of the term with the result of their work, this would not be acceptable. At least in my experience it was not. We are free, but in a defined framework, and we can only magnify freedom by deconstructing and moving beyond the boundaries of these frameworks. Rancière (2016) also mentions that:

> ...it is the framework within which we learn and know, within which the work of our mind is linked with that of all other minds, within which, in short, the exercise of our intellectual capacity comes into agreement with the inequality of the social order (p. 590).

ELLY: These frameworks and structures affect individuals to the extent that the issue of knowledge for students becomes a secondary issue in education. As Rogoff exemplifies the student strike of 2009 in Austria and explains that the main agenda of this strike was financial. It was related to tuition fees, while the subject of strikes in education environments before the 1980s addressed the quality of education (United Nations 2022), and what was being taught in the universities (Rogoff 2010). Given this example, the question is, can we deny the influence of the structure and framework that we study within?

NEGAR: I completely agree, the universities, academia and knowledge production eventually become an apparatus of control which is used to direct thoughts in order to achieve power.

ELLY: Rancière (2016) also stated that all education tries to gain power by producing knowledge, because this power is produced and reproduced by the 'inequality of intelligence'. Learning, according to his theory, means to understand the connections and links to a 'whole', which can be recognized as the knowledge presented by the institutions:

> This means that it must be presupposed as inherent to the power of making the links, to the capacity of those who know how to know. Now, this capacity in turn is demonstrated in a very specific way: it is demonstrated out of the incapacity of those who do not know how to know, those who are before the thing and do not see the link. (p. 591)

SAMAN: From my experience, I acknowledge that each field of study is different from the others, and I have witnessed that the field of art does not fit simply into the defined frameworks. It always tries to find a way to skip them.

SIAVASH: The important point you mentioned was that the disciplines of social sciences or art cannot fit into the norms and structures, but I must admit, as Elly mentioned, that Rancière (2016) discusses the many efforts that are being made in the education system, even in art, to establish frameworks by turning everything into knowledge. Is there any area of knowing that science has not yet penetrated by making it a subject of research?

ELLY: Rancière (2016) clarifies that there is no space for experience or

knowledge outside the framework of institutions, as science has adopted all the interesting subjects and developed them into a product of knowledge through research. For this reason, he speaks of 'unlearning' and articulates that inequity and the lack of freedom are raised as soon as a person enters the learning process.

HOOMAN: I take the words of everyone as given, and I agree with all that has been discussed, but my main question is, what should be done now?

SIAVASH: This is a critical and urgent question. What should be done? And if I want to ask this question as a fundamental question of research, I would phrase it as: Is there any other way that educational institutions have thought about these issues? Because the universities seek to achieve progress and improve societies by producing knowledge, we as academics discussing these concerns are trying to talk about these fundamental issues, whether there will be a solution to them or not. In my opinion, this is crucial. Are we aware of the structures and frameworks? And when we teach art, do we realize what we are referring to and pointing at? Sara and Saba have mentioned that they have some accomplishments in the existing educational environment and have achieved some skills. However, the question is: Are these products that you really need, or are they something that the institution, system and structures you studied within need?

NEGAR: I am a little confused and need to ask a question: Are we talking about the institutions and universities in a specific place, time, and context? I accept that there is a common core to the structure of universities, but depending on the social, political, geographical, economic and cultural situations the form of the central core can be changed, and this can affect all the people who experience these environments, and even their outcomes.

SAMAN: Speaking from my own experience, the disciplined structure and framework that Rogoff talks about are not very applicable in higher education in Iran. In contrast to how Rogoff (2010) describes the educational environment in her own context, the atmosphere in Iran is chaotic. There is no determined approach, but also each institution has its own micro-tyranny that is unrelated to other institutions.

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NIMA: Regarding the discussion of freedom within academic frameworks, there are two aspects of freedom. One is related to individuals and to other institutions. Individual freedom is assessed within the institutions, not outside them, because one's freedom depends on the extent to which the institution operates with restrictive frameworks, and if those frameworks are in line with the individual's freedom, and the point at which they reach an intersection. As Negar also mentioned, the problem occurs when the criteria for education of a given institution does not meet the individual's freedom, and these criteria are imposed when the institutions have power and sovereignty over individuals.

My experience differs from the others. I first studied accounting at university, then I learned various techniques of photography by attending art institutions, and when I realized that my work lacked some theories and artistic aspects, I decided to enter art school. This helped me to grow, compared to what I learned before.

As Hooman mentioned, I also believe that there is a paradox in our conversations, in that we are referring to articles that have been published as an outcome of the academy but also critically discuss the academic framework itself; thus, we are contradicting what we are referring to. Although I am not in favour of these limitations, it is not possible to deny all the privileges of the academy because this denial would not be beneficial at all. We need to find a possible way within the impossible, and my question is: Can this be possible? Can we find new ways to freely experience within the limitations which exist within institutions?

SIAVASH: The point you made is very important and is also articulated by Rogoff (2010):

> ...there is a vexed relation between freedom, individuality and sovereignty that has a particular relevance for the arena being discussed here, as educational and knowledge have the foothold both in the processes of individuation and in the processes of socialization. (p. 3)

She also quotes Hannah Arendt to explain the tangled relationships between these concepts. In general, power is formed where the individual exists, and

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the individual exists in society, and it is in understanding each other that these expressions make sense:

> … the freedom of one man, or a group, or a body politic, can only be purchased at the price of freedom… it is indeed very difficult to understand how freedom and non-sovereignty can exist together or put in another way, how freedom could have been given to men under the condition of non-sovereignty. (p. 3)

And this is the paradox that you, Nima, mentioned. In regard to your question about the possibility of finding new ways in this paradoxical condition created by limitation, I need to refer to a famous quote from Deleuze and Guattari (1994): '…think of that which cannot be thought and yet must be thought' (p. 60). To find new possibilities, one should not seek to gain knowledge, but rather to deal with what is unknown. But the question is, how can we access the unknown?

ELLY: In response to you, one who is faithful to action will discover the unknown, and in the words of Mashayekhi (2014) in their discussion of Deleuze's philosophy 'where a man loses his faith in action, it is where he regresses' (p. 58). Practice and experimentation with a certain quality can provide an opportunity for opening new possibilities of the unknown, and he believes that artists have the insight to find new possibilities through art (Deleuze & Guattari 1994).

SIAVASH: To better understand this, I will give you an example that illustrates what we have discussed so far. Imagine a pack of wolves chasing a man; he reaches a precipice, and in this case, what decision can he make? Since one uses logic to decide what to do, one option is to fight the wolves to survive, and one option is to hide somewhere, but there is also another option, which is jumping off the cliff: A choice 'which cannot be thought and yet must be thought' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994: 60). As viewed through a Deleuzian lens, this person can think of jumping the cliff because new possibilities might emerge in this situation that make it possible for them to survive, and these new possibilities can only be raised by acting, not by reasoning or logic alone.

Why does this person never consider the experience of jumping off the cliff? Because he knows he will be hurt. And why does he know that? Because he has acquired this knowledge from the experience of others. He has never experienced it himself, but can project what will happen. Every thought that is in line with logic and reason is in fact knowledge which is acquired in the institutions, the limitations, frameworks, and sovereignty of which we have just discussed. Thus one cannot rely on what one knows but also on what one doesn't know, the unknown. I am not suggesting that the man should jump from the cliff, but that he should think beyond what he knows and be aware of possible options. We need to be aware of limitations and frameworks and find new possible ways to act within them, even if these ways of acting do not seem logical. It is obvious that there is a framework and within the framework there are limitations to gain knowledge. Yet the question is, whether it is possible to be aware of these limitations? Would taking action with this awareness be different?

NEGAR: In my opinion, this is the moment of freedom – when you are aware. However, this process does not necessarily happen to everyone, intentionally; many decide not to be aware and freedom as awareness brings responsibility. When you decide to jump off the cliff, all the consequences need to be accepted, and ethically you are responsible for the actions you take. This is an unpredictable, uncontrolled situation that not everyone is willing to put themselves in.

ELLY: It should be noted that some of these consequences are set by institutions to hinder the experience of unknowns. For example, if you don't follow the instructions, your mark will be reduced, or if you don't attend your classes on a determined regular basis, you may not pass your course. This power will not allow individuals to experience freely.

HOOMAN: Around eight or nine years ago, I read a book called 'New Learning in Philosophy' by Deleuze, which was very small and fluent, and there was a section of thesis and anti-thesis that could be discussed further; but I want to admit that I believe there are many paradoxes in Deleuze's philosophy as well. He even denies his own philosophy at some point.

SAMAN: I think the ambiguity Hooman raised is the problem of translation, which makes understanding Deleuze very difficult. So I searched for more Farsi articles about Deleuze, and I begin to read some other marginal texts about his 'radical democracy'. In fact, Deleuze uses concepts created by Spinoza; of course, the subject may not be related to our discussion, but it deals with some of the concepts we have mentioned. In all the articles I read, what Hooman described was clear, and there is a philosophical paradox in his theory. If we accept what he offers, again we are in a framework, a Deleuzian framework.

ELLY: What Deleuze offers can never become a pattern or framework to follow because every process is unique and different due to unpredictability. Even if a structure or framework is built, it can be said each construction is different from the other.

SIAVASH: It is no coincidence that we assume that there is ultimately a structure, because this is how we understand the world. However, the world is not built upon a structure, and every phenomenon is built randomly. To understand this random world, we create patterns and structures through knowledge. Postmodernism and Deleuze criticize this knowledge and ask: Why are we confident that the world is what we think and understand? To answer this question, we need to doubt our knowledge and insert 're' at the beginning of our thoughts: To re-think, re-look, and find new ways of looking and understanding. In doing so, we are not entering into a new framework or structure because we are not in favour of or against any construction. In other words, we should abandon our pre-established thought in encountering our experiences in education, and as Philips (2018) articulated encounter 'everything as if for the first time' (p. 71).

To give another example which I learned from one of my teachers, there was a test, and, in this test, the research group give a photograph to a group of people who had never encountered a print photograph before and did not know about the concept of photography. Usually, when we are given a photograph, we look at the image that was taken and never think of looking at it in another way. However, this group did not notice the image and were touching and looking at the piece of paper they were given. Why do you think that is?

Because we already have knowledge of how to look at a photograph, and never think of looking at it in another way.

ELLY: In another way, they never intentionally think of encountering something different; they encounter it as it was the first time they encountered it, and this is what Deleuze refers to as finding new possibilities of encountering. The question is, how we can create such possibilities in art education? Do the academies have such potential? How about the GalleryGardi? In your experience of GalleryGardi, were you able to find new ways of understanding last semester?

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OUR CONVERSATION CONTINUES

In this paper, we have read three selected articles from western authors who address issues of freedom, individuality, sovereignty, the limitations to and construction of education within the academy. Together, we argue that the invention of possibilities, with the help of Deleuzian philosophy, may offer new ways of thinking about art education, and give us some freedom in making-doing-thinking. Finally, we point out the experience of the authors in encountering these articles and how our conversation unfolded as part of our GalleryGardi (GG) practice. All members of this group were part of GG as an emerging art event and we extend the concept of GG to our reading of these articles. GG and our readings are a spontaneous practice that in our case formed in response to Iranian art communities which are independent from the influence of any specific organization, like universities. In the third part of the conversations, we examine if GalleryGardi can provide an opportunity for art education that is sustainable, accessible, and equitable, and if it has the potential to strengthen individuals through empowerment and the promotion of social inclusion (United Nations 2022).

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