

# LEARNING FROM ART HOW TO DISOBEY

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## ABSTRACT

The text reflects on disobedience concerning informal art education. The aim is to trace possible directions of what artistic research today can represent for the scientific, social, and educational world in terms of the emancipatory potential it can foster. The text addresses the issue of disobedience from three perspectives. It reviews three historical experiences of artists who deal with the educational-pedagogical practice. It explores the digital archives of two curatorial projects, depositaries, and activators of dissident knowledge. It presents a performance in the form of a public assembly, where I was personally involved.

## KEYWORDS

art practices, unlearning,  
pedagogy of art,  
informal learning

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## INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, art has increasingly become a tool for expressing social and political identity and freedom claims, giving voice and form to public and individual life needs that characterize social movements (Milbrandt, 2010). Art is a powerful agent of transformation and could save the world (Martins & Popkewitz, 2015). On the one hand, recent movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, The Women's March, Umbrella Movement, and Fridays for Future show how arts have acquired an increasingly relevant role in contributing to those actions of a claim that have as protagonists above all the younger generations (Travis, 2018). On the other hand, the emergence, within different institutions, of art-based learning and research practices accentuates the conflict with those neoliberal policies that measure education in terms of competition, conformity, prescription, and production of results (Borgdorff, 2012). From an epistemological point of view, the ever-living tension between the determination of disciplining power-knowledge and its contestation would represent the relevant contribution that research in or through art can offer to the scientific and educational apparatuses in the way it encourages the interruption and violation of argumentative forms and academic decorum in the name of experimentation (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012). Hence the urgency of a critical debate on art education's institutional, civil, and political meaning.

In this text, disobedience is considered not as rebellion for its own sake but as a moment of real learning, an event of non-conformity that opens new ways of thinking and acting. (Atkinson, 2017). Thus, disobedience is a creative process of involvement and experimentation, an event that confronts assimilated ways of knowing and practical knowledge and, therefore, can open up new possibilities.

Jacques Rancière, drawing some correspondence between the history of theatre and education (Rancière, 2007), challenges those theories that measure the spectacle of learning through passivity. According to the philosopher, the active/passive opposition divides society between those who enjoy ability and those who do not, and in this sense, it is an allegory of social inequality. The ignorant schoolmaster is the one who abolishes the distance between learning and understanding (Rancière, 1991), whose objective is not so much to transmit to their students what they do not know but to provide them with the key to access their emancipation, i.e., to encourage them to use their

intelligence, which is the same in all humans, albeit different in its manifestations.

Moreover, through the notion of disobedience, this text revises some historicized and contemporary artistic practices that deal with informal learning on several levels, starting from a social contingency and contributing to its emancipation. The study does not intend to propose a specific didactic method, but on the contrary, to offer formal pedagogies some inputs of experimentation. Art can act as a space or collective event of contestation, doubt, and conflict, where it is possible to subvert the rules of representation of the self, the group, and the community in contrast to the increasing conformity, regularization, and prescription that pervades pedagogical work in many contexts today (Atkinson, 2017). This article proposes to define an agenda that moves art and its disciplinary teaching from a sectorial and two-dimensional position to an event-space in transformation and movement, performative and contextualized. In the first part, I review three cases of artistic research that began in the 1960s and became influential in the contemporary world. Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, Jorn's Imaginist and then Situationist Movement, and Beuys' Free University are experiences that question existing educational models through collective practices that include new subjectivities and re-found spaces to imagine new institutional forms. The second part considers two contemporary research curatorial projects, such as the Disobedience Archive, initiated by curator and art critic Marco Scotini in 2005, and Radical Pedagogies created by architectural historian Beatriz Colomina in 2013. The approach moves from exploring the archives to focusing on educational and artistic institutions. Finally, the last part presents the case of "Utopia" (2017), a collective performance in which I was co-author and participant.

## GENEALOGIES. RADICAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN ART

In the 1960s, Augusto Boal launched an educational practice based on theatre aimed at emancipating weak and exploited social classes, such as Brazilian peasants and workers. From here, and inspired by Paulo Freire's lesson (Atkinson, 2017), Boal founded the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2014), a set of actions, games, and group performance exercises that start from the evidence of a social and individual conflict and that over the years has become an artistic model of education and activism spread all over the world. Instead of being subjected to

an oppressive situation, Boal proposes a space to explore it collectively through the use of voice and body. The emancipation passes through ways of liberation triggered by critical observation and contestation, stressing the representation of reality and imagining concrete actions (Boal, 2014). Among the practices, the Theatre of the Newspaper is a set of techniques that offer participants the means to produce artistic work rather than a finished product. Thus, participants develop a theatrical narrative starting from a news article or a political report. Alternatively, Image Theatre (Boal, 2021) is a set of techniques that allow people to experience communication through images and space rather than words. The idea, linked to the non-verbal, allows knowledge beyond the conscious mind's control, overcomes defenses and repressions, and helps to free the imagination. Another exercise is the Forum Theatre (Boal, 2021), where the protagonist cannot fight a situation of oppression. The participants take turns to play the role and invent strategies of defense and resistance. According to The Theatre of the Law (Boal, 2021) techniques, these considerations can become draft laws when the participants later gather around a table.

In 1956 the artist Asger Jorn wrote the manifesto of the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (Jorn, 2006), founded in Alba, Italy, a few years earlier. John speaks about artistic research as concerning science and claims the same possibilities as scientific research, describing the type of institution able to welcome and promote it. Such a space cannot be educational, and therefore repetitive and imitative of the works of the great masters, as was the case in the Bauhaus, a school conceived to answer the question: "What kind of 'education' do artists need to take their place in the machine age?" (Jorn, 2006, para 1). Jorn abolishes the term 'education' in the question, proposing an ontological question instead, "Where and how to find a justified place for artists in the machine age?" (Jorn, 2006, para 3), in the belief that the transfer of artistic qualities is not direct but consequent to a series of inevitably conflicting phases such as shock, wonder, imitation, rejection, experimentation, and possession. The space that Jorn imagines has the eventual collective and playful qualities he finds again when he joins the Situationist International the following year. According to the Situationists and Jorn, play, freedom of use of the territory, drift, psychogeography, and a preference for indeterminate urban spaces were all aspects that could reunite the individual with the city. The artistic practice moves 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 resulted in the young people's desire for change in May 1968.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Josef Beuys was already a professor of sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf; in 1967, he founded the Student Party and, in 1971, the Organization for Direct Democracy through Referendums. For Beuys, teaching became an integral part of his work, and he 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 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 practicing one of the traditional art forms, and even in the case of artists, creativity is not just the exercise of their art. Each of us has a creative potential overshadowed by competitiveness and the aggression of success. To recognize, to explore this potential is the purpose of school. (De Domizio Durini, 1991)

By appealing to free culture, Beuys was not referring so much to artists' work but to the renewal of educational methods and the university. In 1973 Beuys and the Nobel Prize winner Heinrich Böll founded the Free International School of Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research,<sup>1</sup> open to all without limits of accessibility and to pursue the integration of the educational system while raising critical issues and suggesting equality. The idea of the Free International University is taken further by various people and groups, including the author Rainer Rappmann under the FIU-Verlag and the F.I.U. in Amsterdam, Gelsenkirchen, Hamburg, and Munich, initiated by Beuys' students. Also, the organizations Mehr Demokratie e.V. and the Omnibus for Direct Democracy are included.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from developing concurrently and being seminal experiences that survive today as influences in research, art, and educational practices, the three occasions offer some points in common regarding the theme of disobedience and the concept of teaching art. From an emancipatory point of view, Boal's techniques are based precisely on liberation through constructing a space of experimentation of non-verbal dialogue between the oppressed and the oppressors. Theatre allows acting on the border between representation and reality, activating a path of conscientization and

empowerment in which participants act both as spectators and actors, stimulated by a conductor who problematizes the case but is not a leader, and therefore proposing equality and decision-making power to the group. Models and techniques can be applied in every place where a situation of the individual or collective conflict occurs, capable of putting the group in the condition of finding its specific answers. In these terms, Boal bases his pedagogical method on the concatenation between the Freirian conceptual model and the experimental body of exercises and techniques that are innervated from time to time by new contingent experiences.

The practical activity must emerge from the pedagogical action, concludes Jorn's manifesto. The emancipation of artistic research lies in the possibility of freeing oneself from the obligations of dogmatism and the search for truth. To grasp the present means for the artist to get the contradiction in the things of the world. Such '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. Therefore, it is necessary for there to be an anti-professional and anti-intellectual activity, autonomous, but at the same time in continuous collaboration with the community and intellectuals. Since only the amateur can go beyond his previous knowledge and unpredictably approach learning, the artist is, for Jorn, a professional amateur. The famous university is the institutional model to be followed because it is anti-didactic and anti-professional.

The manifesto later became entitled "Art and the Popular University" (Jorn, 1957), in which Jorn expanded on his anti-disciplinary vision and even imagined a Department of Destruction. Explaining the idea of social sculpture in the university's founding manifesto, Beuys writes of "a creation that involves artistic and musical techniques, or the use of talent and imagination, and the ability to model material that could be extended to other socially relevant spheres" (Beuys & Böll, 1973, p. 150). The pedagogical model was that of a permanent conference to help realize all individuals' capacity to be creative beings by supporting the transmission and hybridization 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, rather the interaction between social resources as a way of indivisible liberation and promoting democratic potential.

The F.I.U. aims to go beyond sterile action, turning its attention to education, economics, and the defense of nature, it was therefore created as a place of confrontation between different people who together reflect on contemporary reality, trying to converge their energies in the creation of concrete models and alternative proposals, it is based on the concept of 'permanent conference' (Beuys & Böll, 1973).

## MAPS OF DISOBEDIENCE

In this second part, the intention is to recount the learning experience through two recent curatorial research projects, both offered virtually in the form of online public digital archives. These are the Archive of Disobedience,<sup>3</sup> started in 2005 by Marco Scotini, curator and art critic, and the research project Radical Pedagogies,<sup>4</sup> curated by Beatriz Colomina with a group of Ph.D. students from Princeton University, School of Architecture. Although with different assumptions, both projects propose the virtual space as a repository, an archive, of research, allowing public consultation of collected documents. In both cases, the projects are accompanied by moments of specialization and materialization through exhibitions. The former has been exhibited in various configurations, including Kunstraum Bethanien Berlin; Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven; Riga Art Space; M.I.T., Boston; Castello di Rivoli Turin, and three journals came out as a compendium of the installation at the most recent exhibitions. Also, in the second case, the exhibition 'Radical Pedagogies: Reconstructing Architectural Education' was presented at the Warsaw Under Construction Festival in 2015, the 14th Venice Architecture Biennale in 2014 and the Lisbon Architecture Triennial in 2013.

The Archive of Disobedience was born with Marco Scotini's idea of a traveling exhibition composed of ephemeral and circulating materials such as videos and graphics. Disobedience is not only recounted here as a chronicle episode but especially in terms of media strategies. The Archive thus represents a collection of heterogeneous artistic practices of dissidence, "it can be seen as a sort of manual of media tactics against oppression" (Casagrande, 2014, p. 380). According to Scotini, an action of dissidence:

[I]s not to be understood simply as the refusal of a pre-established disciplinary knowledge but presupposes a new demand, an alternative project quality; it is a founding act of a space of freedom with a high emancipatory value filled with unexpected imaginaries and new subjectivities



not yet represented. (Casagrande, 2014, p. 381)

Over time, the archive has developed as a platform for continuously collecting these materials. Each time the library takes exhibition form, it is placed in context, collaborating with local institutions and artists, reconfiguring the exhibition, and adding new sections, materials, and compendia. Among the teams, “University of Disobedience” is introduced by a significant question: “In the end, is it not within educational processes rather than wage labor organizations that new forms of social antagonism have taken shape since the 1970s?” (Casagrande, 2014, p. 383). The educational principle itself, the editor argues, reaffirms the relationship of subordination between those who command and those who obey. It is precisely this law of legitimation of authority that the disobedient does not accept. Among the films archived in the section is *Trauma 1-11: Stories about the Copenhagen Free University and the surrounding society in the last ten years* (2011), in which Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen, in collaboration with Emma Hedditch, Howard Slater, and Anthony Davies, narrate their journey in the period 2001–2011 in and around the Copenhagen Free University in a narrative way through an audio play for acts. A space for research, knowledge sharing, critical consciousness production, and poetic language began in Copenhagen’s tiny flat. *What is 16 Beaver?* (2003) is the story of the artist-run space at 16 Beaver in Lower Manhattan, which began in 1999 as a communal place to share research, questions, understandings, concerns, and struggles in a permanent conference. The film *Prototypes. Claremont, Listening Session for Twelve Sound Objects* (2011) is by the AIDS activist collective Ultra-red which, along with many other collaborations, develops a practice of militant listening by bringing people together around a shared experience of listening to a demonstration, a simple walk in the neighborhood, an emancipatory or political struggle. The group’s accounts of the incident become ‘songs of pain.’ *Facts of Life/Unarchive* (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 participated in the philosopher’s seminar by broadcasting the original materials on an old monitor while at the same time filming the students’ attitudes and behavior.

The research project *Radical Pedagogies* 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 and institutions, and politics. From the archives emerges a dense network of movements that refer to each other with the aim of educational and political liberation, capable of shaking up society. As Colomina says, “The pedagogy of architecture has always been a political act” (Meister & Colomina, 2015, p. 2) because it is a communal space where reflection and action bounce off each other. So pedagogical experimentation in the arts itself is an artistic or architectural practice. The radicality lies in this contingency between the ideological model, its contextual and immediate experimentation, and the disciplinary openness to social and economic processes and community interaction: these cases’ upheavals concern curricula, polytechnics, and the hierarchical teacher-student relationship. Here, too, the exhibition phase is an engine for the progressive implementation of the archive with new experiences and documents. To date, the mapping covers a global dimension, designed to “see and discuss the resonances and dissonances between these experiments” (Meister & Colomina, 2015, p. 2) everywhere. Online, the relationships between political dissent and architectural pedagogy emerge in a virtual archive. To each radical experience corresponds a fact sheet, archival images, and interviews with the protagonists. In addition, a map provides a geographical overview 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, U.S.A., appears in the period 1975–1981. The experimental summer school was born from the union of different feminist instances emerging from some architecture schools to build a network to support the minority representation of women at the time and, in any case, open to any woman, regardless of background. Each of the four sessions that characterized this experience took place in different locations in the United States to facilitate accessibility. Topics included personal transformation and social change, inclusivity, and a female architect’s role in empowering women’s lives. Under the heading “collective creativity”, the workshops of Anna and Lawrence Halprin, dancer, and landscape architect, respectively, were held in the Bay Area, California, the U.S.A., between 1966 and 1971. The participants came from various disciplines, including dance, sociology, and architecture, and were involved in creative group actions about nature. The *Experiments in Environment* were

pedagogical experiments that pursued “modes of learning through exploration and direct experience” (Meister & Colomina, 2015, p. 4) of the environment, instruments of collective creativity through which the city would be understood as a space for social action. Under the heading ‘collective experiment’ is the Analogous City, an international collective project of 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 by assembling architecture images with the students. 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. A collage, made up of copies of the history of art and architecture books, was assembled in the Institute of Architecture, thus embodying both the pedagogical and the iconic value.

## **UTOPIA: AN EXPERIMENT OF EMANCIPATION IN THE PUBLIC SPACE**

‘Utopia’<sup>5</sup> is the performance title in the form of a public assembly conceived by Museo Wunderkammer<sup>6</sup> for the Rione 2 giugno of Riva del Garda in Italy, on the occasion of Heritage Days 2015 in collaboration with the Museo dell’Alto Garda. On the wave of the need to build social housing, the 1970s saw the almost simultaneous birth of various housing cooperatives. The new neighborhood design envisages a large amphitheater with a social housing network to the southeast and cooperative housing to the northwest. In the central basin of the district, there is a significant public services area with a municipal swimming pool, a municipal service building, and a sports center with a public green urban park. The new Scipio Sighele secondary school completes the district in terms of public services. The new middle school was designed in a climate of lively and debated innovation: not a traditional building of corridors and classrooms but a modular space where teaching and educational innovations could be expressed and implemented, including the extension of school hours, open classrooms, and recreational time. The school in the new neighborhood aimed to become the fulcrum of integration between school time and leisure time for young people: the equipped and green spaces surrounding the building were open spaces that could be used for leisure once the school was closed. This beautiful utopia would clash with a reality that would lead the school to fence off its spaces year after year

to safeguard them and protect pupils during sports and recreational activities (Franceschi, 2019). Against this background, Museo Wunderkammer decided to set up a working group<sup>7</sup> to organize a public assembly in the neighborhood. The group, made up of different subjects, both experts and professionals as well as activists, met cyclically to develop the idea of a staged public assembly during which the institutions would present the forthcoming redevelopment of the neighborhood, starting with the restoration of the typical recreational space between the school and the civic services and therefore the removal of the gates. The working group sketched out a script. Several roles were assigned, some entirely fictional—the municipal secretary for urban participation—and others real, such as the local historian and a former teacher in the school. Most of the actors staged a role corresponding to their occupation in reality: the town planner presented the fake town plan, the historian and teacher spoke about the founding utopia, and the mother from the audience worried about the degradation of the neighborhood and the safety of her children, the young woman called for participation and shared spaces. We declared the assembly an artistic performance, distributed several flyers in the neighborhood, and contacted many associations, including those of older people, parents, and cooperative and subsidized housing. Anyone could take part in the performance. The mock assembly took place in the center of the neighborhood amphitheater with specific attention to the setting. The setting was a parliamentary radial arrangement of seats around a table on each side seated the actors who would present the neighborhood redevelopment project. Other actors were sitting in the audience. Many people came to the performance, not only from the neighborhood but also from the whole town. A moderator introduced the various interventions and, at the end of the “institutional” presentation, gave the floor to any citizen who wished to intervene. The various voluntary interventions of citizens took turns, sometimes choosing to follow the staging and putting other urgent issues in the public square that needed attention. After the assembly, we proposed a walk along the neighborhood’s gates, providing each participant with a stick to strike the railings, followed by a noisemaker. The walk thus turned into a choral concert. As described during the preparatory work of the working group, the subject of Utopia is the use of participatory planning by institutions to produce consensus. The clash between real and imaginary opened a free space for critical reflection on the conflict between the institution and the city, between neighbors, on the public role of the school

and the importance of its spaces, between territorial policies and individual imaginaries.

## CONCLUSIONS

The text develops along three interconnected lines in search of a concept of disobedience in the art that can open a space for critical discussion on contemporary educational and scientific models. The experiences of the Theatre of the Oppressed, the Imaginist and then Situationist Movement and the Free University give space to the idea of a non-hierarchical pedagogy extended to society and a moment in art designed to experience contradictions. The artists propose to deal with conflict in opposition to traditional educational methods starting with confrontation, liberation exercises and communication practices between the different components of society. Particular attention is given to the construction of collective art experiences. These collectives confront each other on a social, political, and ideational level. Exactly as it happens or can happen, these examples are therefore political because they construct microscopic and communitarian interventions capable of dissolving the oppressed, students and non-students, into a new category to build new relationships, hence new social realities capable of emancipating themselves and their representation. The deep through the two digital archives aimed to understand the archival device's effectiveness in transmitting artistic and didactic dissidents. Experimentation has allowed me to select personal investigation paths, which range both over time and globally. As the artist and theorist Hito Steyerl states, a conflictual perspective will enable us to define a map that is not just one of the large urban centers of cultural production but also touches the so-called peripheral and isolated realities. Thus, genealogically, one can speak of art through research when moments of crisis, revolution, or refoundation have occurred. Imaginary geography, therefore, emerges as a product of the hybridization between the daily practices of resistance and the global instances of history. Instead of confining art to a disciplinary point of view, a conflict map delegates its research activities to terms of contingency and emancipation. In the third part, I recounted the birth and unfolding of performance in public space as a participatory assembly. The school building assumes a vital role in the development of the neighborhood not only from a functional point of view but also from a collective and social one. Through several practices that straddle art, performance, and theatre, it was possible to pivot on the school's theme to talk more broadly about the collective

dimension and thus foster a moment of confrontation that had been forgotten. Emancipation—the assumption that everyone has the same ability to offer an intelligent response to a book, a performance, or a work of art (Rancière, 1991) should be the precondition for equality. Access to knowledge is, therefore, an act of emancipation, not because there is an institutional figure that legitimizes it, but because it expresses the desire to express oneself to affirm one's freedom and singularity given by the 'inequality in manifestations' of intelligence, which is the same for all men and women. Rather than suppressing the mediator object favoring communicative immediacy, it is necessary to safeguard the third term of comparison to which all the parties refer and which they can interpret. The distance of this third term is the fundamental prerequisite of any communication. By calling the spectators (students) to be active interpreters, Rancière intends to affirm that the politics of participation could also lie better precisely because of the idea that we are all capable of inventing our translation.





Figure 1: Museo Wunderkammer





Figure 2: Museo Wunderkammer



Figure 3: Museo Wunderkammer

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://web.archive.org/web/20110910110005/http://www.beuys.org/fiu.htm>
- 2 <http://www.social-sculpture.org/free-international-university-fiu>
- 3 <http://www.disobediencearchive.org>
- 4 <https://radical-pedagogies.com>
- 5 <https://www.museowunderkammer.it/it/news/utopia>
- 6 Museo Wunderkammer - curban imaginaries collection is a collective founded by Luca Bertoldi and Giusi Campisi in 2014 in the form of a museum, a public artistic action, a political gesture that proposes a questioning of the power relations at the basis of cultural representations. <https://www.museowunderkammer.it/it/progetto>
- 7 Piergiorgio Caserini, Vincenzo D'Andrea, Michela Embriaco, Cristina Mattiucci, Mauro Milanaccio, Maria Grazia Ruggieri, Luigi Scolari, Francesca Testa, e Ivana Franceschi.

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