

# GLOBAL TOOLS OF LEARNING

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The world agenda of 1973 was dominated by a politically precipitated energy crisis. In October 1973, as a consequence of Yom Kippur War, of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries announced an oil embargo against Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, United Kingdom and USA. Heavily affecting everyday life in Europe and elsewhere, the following crisis has been entered in history as the First Oil Shock. In Italy this period was characterized by socio-political turmoil and the rise of both left- and right-wing terrorism which gave origin to the well-known *Anni di Piombo* (Years of Lead). With this as its background, in 1973 the architect Alessandro Mendini, then director of the magazine *Casabella* – together with a promising generation of young designers and prominent figures of Radical Architecture, Arte Povera and Conceptual Art – promoted *Global Tools*, an experimental program of art and design education.

The premise of *Global Tools* was a counter-school devoted to the idea of emancipating the individual through new instruments of learning and developing a new relationship between the mind and hands. The program consisted of five working groups: Body, Communication, Construction, Survival and Theory. *Global Tools* set out to divulge a different purpose of creativity itself, namely that of achieving a “non-productive” outcome, “evaluated as a hypothesis of the abolition of labor.”<sup>1</sup>

The desired connection between mind and hands required new instruments of learning for the globalizing world, which were found in a strange blend of artistic performative practices and field research. For example, “to test the experience of acquisition and possession of instruments of communication” a group formed by Guido Arra, Ugo La Pietra, Gianni Pettena and Franco Vaccari decided to take a trip along the Rhine in September 1974

from Dusseldorf to Basel on a boat named France.<sup>2</sup> For several days the members of the group worked in a coercive situation – without leaving the boat – observing and recording the communicational dynamic inside and documenting the monotonous post-industrial landscape of the river. Following along the path of its paradigmatic predecessors such as California’s Pacific High School,<sup>3</sup> *Global Tools* researched and experimented with extra-institutional spaces of learning. It ultimately arrived at the creative strategy of producing liminal spaces, breaking away from established and regulated environments associated with the acquisition of knowledge.

Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner highlights the importance of learning from what he defines as liminal moments: “events such as political or social revolutions (along with other periods of crisis) can thus be considered liminal, as they result in the complete collapse of order and can lead to significant social change.”

Situations of liminality are generative of new forms of knowledge, which call for new structures of learning. “Liminal periods are destructive as well as constructive, meaning that the formative experiences during liminality will prepare the base to occupy a new social role or status. One may see such a *communitas* as the product of ‘anti-structure’ that emerges when entire societies are going through a crisis or a ‘collapse of order.’”<sup>4</sup> In liminal moments is possible to question the foundation of the society and rethink its basic structures of power relations as well as the normativity of learning. Liminality tends to break not only established distributions of wealth and power but also flows of information and knowledge. Different socio-economic strata and social agents enter into conversation and establish processes of exchange and





Credit: Source: Archive Ugo La Pietra

Documentation of *Viaggio sul Reno* [A trip on the Rhine] (1974).

The Free University in Milan, Talk #2: Housing struggles.



knowledge production that follow trajectories otherwise unexpected in ordinary times. The condition of liminality could emerge as a specific contextual condition, but it also could be constructed consciously in search of new heuristic techniques and models.

For *Global Tools*, an initiative that emerged out of the failure of student movements and the consequent return to order inside Italian universities – marking the passage from the last avant-garde to the post-modern era – liminal spaces for experimentation were found outside of educational institutions and academia, such as moments of monotonous river cruise trips or in a remote house in the countryside where its members regularly gathered and where their first and last general workshop, ironically dedicated to survival, was organized. “We did not want to tread the same path as the Bauhaus,” Andrea Branzi recalled, “which revived and regenerated the destructive force of the historical avant-garde as analytical and rational energy ... The solution to this contradiction seemed to be a rejection of systematization.”

By rejecting systematization, a method of learning is called upon to organize its own liminality. This is also why the majority of practices from avant-garde initiatives such as *Global Tools* never fully developed into long-term educational programs. As philosopher and media theorist Boris Groys has noted, “the modern projects are mostly abandoned without being realized and every new generation develops its own projects, its own techniques, and its own professions to realize those projects, which are then abandoned by the following generation.”<sup>5</sup>

How is a new generation, after the finalization of globalization, now trying to answer the same questions and find new structures for the production of knowledge, new global tools of learning? It could be fruitful to look for a new typology of liminal spaces, where the modalities of organizing learning could emerge through ruptures in social, disciplinary, institutional or spatial orders.

The Italian collective of architects Ira-C (Interaction Research Architecture in Crisis Context), in the manifesto for their project *Learning from the Mass* and in the context of Free University in Milan, attempts to provide a new definition of the square: “the square is not understood in a morphological sense, but as a propulsive place of action and knowledge, that ascends to the role of academy. The squares of the Free University are all those places that are symbols of a deformation in the exercise of ownership. Those places which manifest conflict between the forms of anti-democratic control and the daily and informal research of an ever higher freedom and emancipation.”<sup>6</sup> The Free University uses public squares in Milan to organize summits that directly address social issues (like gentrification, housing struggles, no-expo movements) in the financial capital of the country. Its idea is to shift from the format of an elite university to the mass university and onwards to the “metropolis-university” for a production of “living knowledge”, as Gigi Roggero defines it.<sup>7</sup>

Very different platforms for learning are also emerging in various squares across the globe in the midst of civil unrest and in moments of transition. A recent example is The Open University of Maidan in Ukraine, which appeared during the recent governmental crisis and protests that first emerged from the demand for a closer integration with Europe, expanded with calls for the resignation of President Viktor Yanukovich and his government, and ultimately led to the 2014 Ukrainian revolution. During the occupation of Maidan Square,

(literally translated, Independence Square) The Open University of Maidan was offering free, graduate-level lectures to the Ukrainian public in the square. In the months since The Open University of Maidan began, thinkers, business leaders, and academics have delivered over one hundred lectures on everything ranging from how to reform the constitution to how legislation works, how economies function, the social power of free speech and how to build a barricade. The community that gathered together on Maidan decided to turn to knowledge and learning as a tool of empowerment. Besides the lectures and makeshift library, The Open University of Maidan had a program of screenings called ‘Global Protest’ organized by the Visual Culture Research Center, a non-profit organization and a platform for collaboration between academics, artists and activists. The selection of films included documentaries about the events of Arab Spring, videos and presentations on political actionism and activism in Russian contemporary art, discussions about the problem of censorship and documentaries about non-violent resistance movements around the world.

Within different typologies of liminal spaces, the camp appears as another potent category with a specific spatio-temporal dynamic. The structure of the camp as a ‘dislocating localization’ that exceeds the political system of the state is a space where the ‘national’ is placed in temporal suspension. The first university in a refugee camp, Campus in Camps, founded in the Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem, Palestine, works on the level of community and organizes discussions around the topics of exile, the right of return, identity construction and subjectivity building. The goal of Campus in Camps is defined, and explicated upon further in this issue, as ‘decolonizing knowledge’ – the use of education as a liberating and democratizing tool with a common interest. One of the projects of Campus in Camps, the *Collective Dictionary*, is a series of publications written entirely by the university’s participants containing self-generated and locally-sourced definitions of concepts considered fundamental for understanding the contemporary condition of Palestinian refugee camps. The *Dictionary*, collecting conceptual instruments for reflection, resembles the paradigm of manuals that became typical instruments for the do-it-yourself “access to tools” movement in radical pedagogical experiments from the 1970s onwards.<sup>8</sup>

All of the above-mentioned initiatives try to establish an international discourse in which one movement is learning from the other and the exchange between liminal situations appears in the rupture of locality itself. The liminal spaces create a living, extraterritorial and asynchronous network of extra-institutional dimensions of learning in which a new kind of situated knowledge is produced.

While speaking of new spatializations and re-territorializations of knowledge production, it seems natural to arrive to the question: can the art institution be considered a spaces where it is possible to enact some autonomous zones for learning? The apparently supra-national world of art is hosting several initiatives that find shelter and an operational field in the walls of exhibition spaces. The Turkish artist Ahmet Öğüt uses the space of art institutions across Europe to organize lectures of *The Silent University*, a platform for knowledge exchange between migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. It involves those that have had a professional life and academic training in their home countries, but



In January 2014 Maidan Open University (VUM) continued its activities in the Ukrainian House on European Square (formerly the Lenin Museum). This only became possible after protesters captured the building, where police forces were previously based. VUM worked in the lobby next to the Student Coordination Council and the Maidan Library.



are unable to use these skills due to a variety of reasons related to their political status. In such a manner *The Silent University* tries to legitimize the act of teaching and learning by people delegitimized within the borders of the European Union. Another project, *Ecole Mondiale* by Filip Van Dingenen and Ive Van Bostraeten, critically re-enacts the 1902 eponymous colonial project of Belgian King Leopold II, a school to prepare young men for a career in Belgian colonies, through a series of so called 'field stations' to address "notions of relation between man-nature, environment, the transition movement, deep ecology, sacred geometry, bioenergetics, cosmology and the various contradictions dealing within a dialectic principle of dynamism and unity."<sup>9</sup>

What is common between all these propositions is that they critically comment on the consequences of the globalist project elaborated during the last decades of twentieth century. The historically established hegemonic paradigms in the world of knowledge, dictated by geopolitical, social, economic, racial or gender dominance, are shaping the systems of education to a very large extent. That's why the decolonization of knowledge production, as well as the formulation of new interpretative tools, seems to be some of the first goals of critical and cultural inquiries today.

- 1 Archizoom Associati, letter, 1973, from Archive Adolfo Natalini. In: Valerio Borgonuovo, Silvia Franceschini (eds.), *Global Tools 1973–1975* (Istanbul: Salt, 2015).
- 2 Global Tools, Communication Group, 1974. Archive Adolfo Natalini. In: Valerio Borgonuovo, Silvia Franceschini (eds.), *Global Tools 1973–1975* (Istanbul: Salt, 2015).
- 3 Michael S Kaye, *The teacher was the sea. The story of Pacific High School* (Links, 1972).
- 4 Victor Turner, *Between and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*, in *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967).
- 5 Borys Groys, 'The Weak Universalism', *e-flux journal* #15, april 2010.
- 6 Ira-C, Free University, *Learning from the Mass*, 2013.
- 7 Gigi Roggero, *The Autonomy of the Living Knowledge in the Metropolis-University* (European institute for progressive cultural policies, 2007). At: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0707/roggero/en> (accessed August 11, 2015).
- 8 Steward Brandt (ed.), *The Whole Earth Catalogue. Access to Tools* (1968–1974).
- 9 *Ecole Mondiale* by Filip Van Dingenen and Ive Van Bostraeten. At: [www.ecole-mondiale.org/EcoleMondiale.pdf](http://www.ecole-mondiale.org/EcoleMondiale.pdf) (accessed August 11, 2015).



A meeting of Campus in Camps in 2013.

Ecole Mondiale by Filip van Dingenen and Ive van Bostraeten at Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, 2015.

