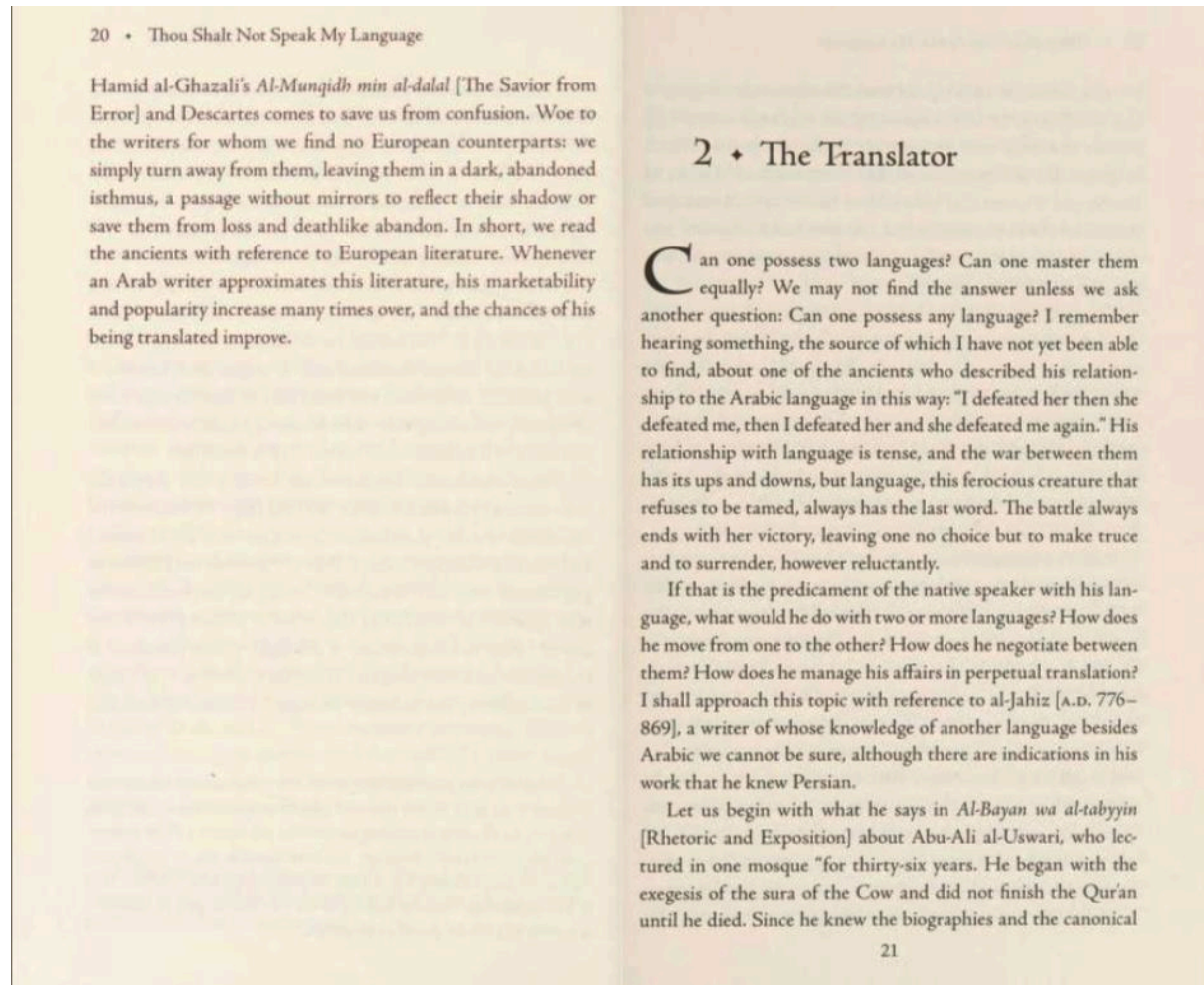


As we delve into our discussion of language and translation, I propose we start with a short attunement reading. This reading, by the Moroccan writer Abdelfattah Kilitto, poses a thought-provoking question: Can a person truly own two languages? I will read it in Arabic and show a translation.

[Slide 1]

Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language (Book, P.21)



[Books: School and What is an Art School]

Before I start going more deeply into the project, I ask you to think about parallelisms of other case studies, literature, and methods and how to situate the study within other comparative and adjacent fields that are more familiar to you.

[INTRODUCTION]

This project is entangled with my educational biography.

My formal training is in architecture.

My education and practice have extended to visual art, curatorial research and independent publishing.

My interest stems from my first-hand experience of participating in "independent art schools" over a period of six years between 2018 and 2023.

I was always attentive to how my proximity and positioning within these schools influenced my thinking and artistic practice.

This experience left me with more questions than answers: What conditions led such schools to emerge in the first place? What were we producing there? What is their desired outcome?

[CONTEXT]

The emergence of alternative and independent art schools in cities such as Beirut, Cairo, and Ramallah over the past two decades represents a significant shift in the landscape of art education in the Arab world. These schools distinguish themselves from formal art institutions like—the ‘Art Academy’ and the ‘School of Fine Arts’—by putting together a curriculum more aligned with contemporary art practices and critical thinking, often positioning themselves as a counter-alternative to the perceived inadequacies of formal art education systems, such as outdated course curriculums, separation of departments by medium, exclusion of theory-based study courses, among others.

My proposal has changed over time, as I relied heavily on interviews and collecting personal accounts from participants and artists or curators who initiated those schools.

[THESIS]

While independent art schools claim to fill gaps in formal art education, they actually focus on broadening participants' perception and understanding of the world. This creates a rift, highlighting the separation between their stated mission and the practical outcomes.

I will not go through the case studies and try to lay out the stated mission and what I speculate to be the rift through the collected personal accounts.

I will use a framework of roleplay, ask some of you to lend me your voices and read an excerpt from an interview out loud.

[Case Study 1]

IMAGINARY SCHOOL PROGRAM (CAIRO, 2014-2015)

Stated mission: ISP is an eight-month cross-disciplinary practice-based theory program, comprised of a series of workshops, lectures, fieldtrips, reading groups, and other hybrid activities, the program intends to create a space for reflection and critical thinking on radical institution-building and examine how we understand institutions and their political potential. During the program, we will engage with theory, trying to locate some institutions within a broader spectrum of history, geography, politics and other contextual viewpoints.

[Question 1]

On Beirut's official website, it is stated that ISP was initiated “following the course of the uprisings since 2011 in Cairo...a surge of new initiatives, collectives and institutions have emerged, some out of emergency and immediate urgency, with others empowered by the new space that the political shift seems to have facilitated.”

Do you think that the uprisings following 2011 played a central role in shaping the school? Or was it only the motive for its creation? How much were the events of 2011 included in the discussions that took place during ISP? In a Zoom meeting, Mariz Kelada who is a cultural practitioner and anthropologist, responded:

ANGELA READ HERE ↴

Mariz Kelada: I think the Imaginary School Program was both, and it really depends on who, or for whom. My perception is that to the organisers, the way they spoke about the school and how they wanted to run the program, from programming to the mentors that they assigned. What they wanted us and envisioned us to produce was definitely built into the spark of the revolution. But to me, also in a different sense, and having been involved in cultural organisations and similar programming since even before the revolution, it was only an additional space that opened up because of the revolution. The approach of collaborative projects or different modules is something we have done in the years before in multiple forms, be it with journalism, filmmaking, or street theatre. The idea wasn't necessarily exceptional to what existed before. As a participant, my objective perception of the space was that it seemed cool, it seemed more artsy, less NGO-y, unlike the ones I experienced, for example.

Things were driven to capitalise on an existing view of the revolution spark—or a very particular way of dealing with the discourse around the revolution. At some point, it lost relevance for me because of the hyper-abstraction of a revolutionary moment. At the time, I found that to be in extreme contrast to what was actually going on on the ground. I understand and I respect the artistic urge and the generativeness of speculation, as well as the abstraction of that kind of knowledge production and training. But I felt that there were more immediate, concrete material things that needed attending. That, in a way, alienated me in the process because it has to do with our positionality. And I don't think it's just me. I think it's totally mirroring what's happening now in a way.

Engy Mohsen: That is because you do feel that the moment was still too close to distance yourself from. And you start to theorise around it, as it's still unfolding, in a sense. Or that the aftermath was still present. I'm asking about this, because I feel that this is relevant to the current moment. There's a genocide unfolding, but we're not still in a position where we need to jump to the academic perspective and start to write papers about it. Because this is not what's needed now most.

ANGELA READ HERE ↴

Mariz Kelada: Yeah. That was what. 2014-2015. We were just processing. What happened in 2013. My Master's studies was more action and implementation-oriented. And in a way, I appreciated The Imaginary Space program for contemplation, speculation, and so on. But I think it was moving on too fast into speculating about something that we haven't processed yet, or idealising, or projecting a certain notice, trying to motivate someone into holding on to a spark that

is getting really contested and it's not attuned to the contestation which is happening on the ground.

With this, I realised that the rift happens when trying to perform a process of translation, of code-switching between a revolutionary moment and trying to bring it into contemporary artistic discourses, and vice versa.

[Case Study 2]

SCHOOL OF INTRUSIONS (RAMALLAH, 2019-2024)

As the name suggests, the School of Intrusions (SOI) is an educational practice in occupied Palestine. It uses informal gatherings to engage with urban and rural spaces, treating them as common areas for mutual learning and collective action. Initiated by Palestinian curator Lara Khaldi and Palestinian artist Noor Abed in 2019, SOI uses “intrusion” or “direct intervention” in public sites as a core strategy. It challenges traditional education by integrating it into daily life and exploring community-based, experiential knowledge.

[Question 2]

From the outset, one prominent aspect, as the name suggests, was the ambition to reclaim public space. Since the pilot edition of SOI took place in the West Bank, predominantly in and around Ramallah and Jerusalem, I was curious to find out from Abed and Khaldi whether they believe that the particular political context in Palestine played a role in shaping the school, particularly when it came to reclaiming both private and public sites or “treating [them] as commons,” as mentioned in the project description. In a WhatsApp exchange (May 13, 2024), they responded with a voice message saying:

[Response 2]

SUMU READS HERE ↴

Noor Abed: Yes, I believe it is based on localities and particular contexts. So I think it should take different shapes, I would say, depending on where we are, and it is very particular to sites and places. However, to speak more broadly about the economic and political situation—which are intertwined anyway—we were focusing on the privatisation of private and public spaces and how we can claim them back.

ANGELA READS HERE ↴

Lara Khaldi: We were thinking about the kind of change [instigated by] the quick change in Palestinian society, especially after the 1993 Oslo Accords in terms of public and private space. During the Intifada years, for example, the private space became public, and the public became private at a certain point. With residential houses, for example, you would not lock your house because young people could use it to enter through the front door and leave from the back door to run away from Israeli soldiers at night. Therefore, everything was [turned into a] public space and for common, shared benefit for the community. The epitome was during the first Intifada. Then very quickly after the Oslo Accords, it was not only a kind of political

agreement but very much one that turned the economy and community into privatised, atomised spaces. Public spaces slowly shrank and became more and more privatised. Even the name, School of Intrusions, came about from this kind of 'intruding'. What does it mean to intrude? In a sense, Noor and I consider ourselves reclaiming social space. In practice, we discovered many things about where we are allowed to be and where we are not. Additionally, we learned that we could potentially hold our meetings in many places, but then how much money we had to pay in order to sit in certain places. It was still in the bounds of an economic exchange, so it was also a kind of discovery, an experiment in finding out where we could meet. We even saw it at a certain point as a performance, just to be in a private space and to reclaim it as a public one and what it meant.

SUMU READS HERE ↴

Noor Abed: As Lara said, after the Oslo agreement, there was a wave of neoliberal culture that was forcefully injected. It was not something that naturally evolved in our society but rather enforced as a wave of an economic approach. Of course, it affected the political discourse in many ways, so cities became like bubbles in turn. If you are inside Ramallah, you will find an illusionary sense of freedom. We called it the illusion of the post-colonial while you are still under direct military colonialism, and I think we were intruding into that illusion somehow through different sites.

With this, I realised that the rift happens when trying to perform a process of translation, of code-switching in which the school is used as a strategy, as an invisibility cloak, to negotiate presence in public space and still engage politically. Framing the group's activities within a school format becomes less dangerous than framing them as guerrilla activism, for example. The weight of framing changes significantly if a group of people use guerrilla tactics to force themselves into a space and call themselves a school that aims to engage with discursive content. By positioning the group as a school, they can pursue their goals with a focus on dialogue and education rather than confrontation, making their approach more acceptable and potentially more effective in permeating public spaces.

Case Study 3

HOME WORKSPACE PROGRAM (BEIRUT, 2011-2025)

Launched by Ashkal Alwan in Beirut in 2011, HWP is an annual arts study program that invites participants to develop their formal, technical and theoretical skills in a critical setting, and provides enrolled fellows with feedback and resources to facilitate and support their art practice. HWP is led by Lead Professors (LPs), who organise workshops and seminars based on their practices and invite Visiting Professors (VPs) to lead seminars that complement their curriculum. HWP was initially developed to explore interdisciplinary, critical models of art education in Lebanon and beyond where education is mostly privatized. Moreover, it aims to include a wide range of professors, all the while addressing geopolitical particularities in art and the educational landscape.

[Question 3]

Can you briefly describe your experience participating in HWP? What motivated your decision to participate in the first place? I spoke with Sara Eladl, a writer and curator who took part in Homework Space Program in 2016

[Response 3]

SUMU READS HERE ↴

In a way, I was still doing discursive work, still getting into theory, still getting introduced to new artists. And I just got completely engrossed in theory, research, interactions, conversations. The question wasn't about the collectives or how we would work together, or who we were with each other. It was. We were here as if it was a school and individual project. Everyone has a studio space. I had a studio space that I never used because I didn't need a studio. I was being pressured to use the studio, maybe to actually justify for funders the fact that they have studio spaces. So, you'd let in a researcher or a writer, and then you asked them to go use a studio space for themselves. The problem existed on many layers. First, you already advertised this program as a discursive program. I was mostly interested in theoretical frameworks and placing practices. I don't remember what the brief of the year was. But it wasn't at all in any way advertised that I needed to have a practice in a sense that asks me to produce work, in principle. Second, when we went there, the problem for me was that I saw the problem on both sides. You are a practice-based artist, and you claim to be in a discursive program. You applied to a discursive program, but that was also frustrating for me. Because you're a painter, and you could have picked a studio-based residency. The program never said that you have a studio and you're just going to be left alone painting. So we had a lot of people who were complaining, like, this is too much reading. We're not doing enough hands-on practice. We're not in the right environment. This is actually not the kind of program that you applied for, and it's not how it was advertised. And then, on the other hand, you have the institution telling us point blank, I need finished work by the end of this year, from each one of you. So the two of them, the contradiction, in terms of, I don't know where the contradiction comes from, and I don't really know who said who and who didn't. I'm happy to have had a project to work on, sure. But at the same time, it's not what I thought I was going to do.

What am I supposed to do here? It's advertised that we have mentors and things to read. And this is the structure. We're thinking about financialization. We're thinking about theory and power. We're talking about millions of things. And the curriculum was laid out. It makes no sense to come and be like, I'm sorry, no one's teaching me how to paint. Why are you here? I think there was an expectation in when you're picking artists who have studio-based practices, and you are bringing them into this program, they're interested in expanding that part of their practice. You had some artists who felt that with their studio work, they would hit a bit of a plateau theoretically.

It's a program that brought me so many things. It just brought me a lot of substance, a lot of substance with the curriculum and the people. It gave me access to things that I wouldn't have had access to in Cairo or Beirut otherwise.

With this, I realised that the rift happens when trying to perform a process of translation, of code-switching, in which the school has its own confusion as to what it wants from its participants. Based on that, maybe it didn't choose well the participants who went together, and that was that created a bit of a flat interaction between the people.

[Theoretical Framework]

In his essay "Traveling Theory" (1983), Edward Said expands on his ideas of cultural exchange, hybridity, and disseminating intellectual concepts across geographical and cultural boundaries. Said raises questions about this exchange process that I consider closely:

[Book reading]

Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel—from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. However, one should go on to specify the kinds of movement that are possible to ask whether, by having moved from one place and time to another, an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation.¹

To demonstrate how theory can take different forms as it "travels" from one region, discipline, or discourse to another, I examine Said's essay against the case studies. Said argues that a recognisable and repeated pattern exists in the movement of ideas, typically encompassing three or four common stages. The third stage involves "a set of conditions—call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances—which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be."²

By viewing these alternative art schools through the lens of Said's travelling theory, especially the "set of conditions of acceptance and resistance" that confronted some discourses while being translated into their immediate social, political, and economic contexts, we can better understand the complex interplay between global educational approaches and local practices. This interaction has forged a practice of art education in the Arab world that responds to specific needs and urgencies.

I want to conclude with one of the interview questions that I had prepared to ask towards the end of the interview was, "How do you envision the role of para-institutional art schools

¹ Said, Edward. "Traveling Theory." Essay. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 226. London: Vintage, 1983.

² Ibid, 226.

evolving in the Arab world, considering the current cultural and socio-political landscape?”. I found the answer to that in an older exchange. In 2022, Abed and Khaldi were invited by the School of Commons in Zurich to imagine and narrate the future of the School of Intrusions 20 years later. It was exciting for them as they could only imagine a future where they were liberated and the occupation was over. Imagining the post-colonial moment brought about a lot of excitement. In a letter exchanged by Abed and Khaldi in response, it reads:

[Quote 1]

ANGELA READS HERE ↴

Thinking of the new [School of] Intrusions edition after liberation feels like an exercise in touching, newly touching the land, neighbourhoods, streets, every single flower, tree, mountain, a first breath of our haunted bodies, of all the deaths that we witnessed, of all the ghosts that exiled. (...) I feel that I want to start from those secrets of the land, of the resistance that has now prevailed. Can we intrude in the post-colonial while it is [still] in the making? How is it being shaped?

Reflecting on the future of para-institutional art schools in the Arab world, particularly in the context of liberation and a post-colonial era, brings about a profound sense of hope. The vision shared by Abed, imagining the time of liberation and dismantlement of the occupation, emphasises the potential of these schools to create transformative imaginaries. The reflections on "newly touching the land" and engaging with the "secrets of the land" highlight the deep connection between educational practices and resistance within the evolving cultural landscape in the region at large.