

I Grew Tired of Radical Education

Engy Mohsen, in conversation with Mohamed Abdelkarim,
Huda Zikry, Batool El Hennawy & Hussein El-Hajj

Whenever I am put in a situation where I have to introduce myself or work, I would always start the conversation by saying “*I was originally trained as an architect*”. I felt that this would shield me from harsh criticism, or rather my insecurity for not having received a formal art education.

This text will probably be too personal (and maybe a bit political) for my liking.

Later on, that intro was sharpened to “*Although I haven’t had any formal education in art, ...*”. By then, I have also gained another protective layer of shielding; the language, the art speak, the performative gestures. Architecture school has prepared me for the art world better than any art school. You work under pressure. You learn discipline. You work well with others. You present your work. You sell your ideas. You present yourself. So all I needed was minor recalibrations to channel all those accumulated and acquired skills and employ them in art practice.

I was invited to join the inaugural Roznama Studio Program¹ alongside ten other artists with very diverse practices, which paved the way for my introduction to ‘The World of Art Education’. But even how that program came to be was yet another grant performative gesture.

10 October 2017
Medrar for Contemporary Art
Cairo

A joint statement was released by the jurors² of the extremely popular Roznama, a competition for contemporary emerging Egyptian artists. This was to declare the cancellation of the competition while commenting on the maturity of the proposed works, or rather its lack of;

“We accept responsibility that there is a strong need for awareness and (de)learning on how to properly approach applications. At this moment, we would like to encourage institutions and individual practitioners within this context to think on other ways forward, perhaps by considering and initiating alternative strategies and programming in their own realms, that reflect a continued commitment to the long term development of the local art community and art education for new generations of visual artists.”

¹ Roznama Studio Program was designed and led by Mohamed Abdelkarim, Nour El Safoury and initially Ahmed Badry.

² Didem Yazici, Heba Farid and William Wells alongside Medrar for Contemporary Art—the art space organizing the annual competition and exhibition.

And just like that, a looming crisis was created.

But the Cairo-based Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival soon responded by inviting Medrar to structure a six-month arts program to support Egyptian artists and facilitate a space for artistic production within our shared local contexts.

30 June 2018, 12:00 PM
Roznama Studio Program
Downtown, Cairo

I was asked to share feedback on a book chapter³ assigned prior to a reading session on "Art Education" with my peers. And all I could remember was the number of times I had to read the phrase 'Radical Education' in one of the texts. Curious, I searched for the word in the document. EXACT MATCHES (52). I wondered whether the repetition helped stress the meaning, or rather drowned it in mere redundancy.

Thinking back to this now, I believe I am still tired. I always asked myself radical in what way. I always asked myself alternative to what. Most art programs that I have been part of or similar ones would often stylize themselves as 'independent' or 'alternative' as a clear statement of separation from the more official contexts of art education. But between the attempts to dismiss the 'official' and embrace more universal contemporary art discourses, those alternative models of art education were eventually replicated from other models and locally implemented without the attentiveness to the meaning and conditions of this insertion that lacks any contextualization or adaptation. Hence, I started to believe that there is almost no way to truly find the 'alternative' to our 'official' that can best fit our 'local'.

With Roznama Studio Program, I felt that it was established to promote Arabic as the main working language. This was very evident in the use of language and art speak during all workshops, meetings and group crits. However, this wasn't reflected, however, in the choice of readings, films or works being presented for us to read, engage with and discuss together.

Seeking answers, I sent out a meeting link.

8 February 2022, 1:00 PM
Meeting⁴ w/ Mohamed Abdelkarim
Zoom

³ Sara C. Motta. (2012). Nottingham Free School: Notes Toward a Systemization of Praxis. In: Robert H. Haworth *Anarchist Pedagogies: Collective Actions, Theories, and Critical Reflections on Education*. USA: PM Press. 145 - 161.

⁴ All conversations in this text were recorded, and later on freely translated and edited for brevity and clarity.

EM: In retrospect, how do you feel about the tension created while reading an English text that we would later discuss using very specialized Arabic terms? Was the determination to use Arabic motivated by a political position or a hope for promoting the language in artistic contexts?

MA: We initially decided to design a program in Arabic for many reasons. First, it felt rational because within reading groups or even in casual meetups with other artists and friends, we would hold a conversation in Arabic even after reading an English text. Was it political? No, I don't see it as such because at the end of the day I'm not switching my language, Arabic is already what I speak. So this was neither to promote the Arabic language nor to make a political statement. It was easier and much more comfortable for everyone involved to use Arabic. We made the decision, however, to take the language all the way.

EM: So was this a conscious decision? At some point you sat down together and openly expressed this intent.

MA: Yes. We weren't keen on formulating an implicit understanding of a term that we can otherwise translate. So yes, it was a decision. I thought Arabic would be a more practical choice that suits all participants regardless of their educational backgrounds and language of study. But what was revealed to me is that it isn't an achievement to use a term like "Manhajiyat (Methodologies)" in an educational context, when you will still need to introduce them to what "Methodologies" is. The Arabic counterpart doesn't mean much to them, it isn't used often, a dead word. So there is no reason to use Arabic as long as we don't have a political intention to promote its use and enrich the language. The same goes for so many terms, 'Pedagogy' for example, or 'Aesthetics'.

Now when I reflect on how the program unfolded, I discovered that the effort you need to introduce unfamiliar Arabic terms to the participants, is exactly the same that you would with an English term. At least with the English term, they will be able to engage with it when they come across it in a text.

EM: Why do you think there was little-to-no reference to works or theory that was being locally produced or at least originating from the region?

I don't believe it mattered because anyways most material would be in English. Even if we decided to engage with works by artists from the region; a performance by Walid Raad will be in English, works by Lawrence Abu Hamdan will also be in English, or Akram Zaatari, and so on. The only reason we would have looked into these works would be identity politics, which wasn't one of the objectives of the program. So there was this thinking that contemporary is part of a global system, economically, and even how the processes of knowledge production are never particular, and always trying to escape these particularities. As long as we are working and producing within the sphere of contemporary art, we can't be isolated from all other global

factors. This is all to say that what dictated our choices was neither the language nor the nationality of a said artist, but rather the subject or topic of interest.

End Meeting for All

During that same period, I have heard of a similar long-term research-based educational program which was entirely artist-run and mostly by its own previous students; Students' Council Program by StudioKhana.

“An Egyptian art collective, with a focus on alternative art education and providing various archival and educational material for young Arabic speakers.”⁵

Besides being almost entirely self-organized, I was fascinated by the running piece of information within our circles about how some of the organizers went to the extreme length of translating and providing all theoretical material in Arabic. I was wondering if this provided a shortcut or any sort of situatedness.

Seeking answers, I sent out another meeting link.

9 February 2022, 11:00 AM
Meeting w/ Huda Zikry
Zoom

EM: You have been on both ends of the equation, filling the student's shoes first and then the organizer.

HZ: I believe that there is a sense of grounding vulnerability in having been both and continuing to be both. To work and keep being informed by both positions, the necessity of fulfilling a certain role that one wasn't initially (formally) trained to do creates room for continued learning and acquiring knowledge through practice.

EM: Most participants are graduates or students of the Fine Arts School, meaning that their study language is Arabic. Was familiarization the main reason behind your translations, to remove the potential language barrier and focus on the subject?

HZ: I think I simply tried to think of myself when I was in that position. I would have genuinely appreciated it if the material that I had to read in English had been accessible in Arabic.

⁵ Found on the Facebook page of “StudioKhana for Contemporary Art”, February 14, 2022.

EM: But I believe this knowledge is also accumulative. So the first time you would translate 'Appropriation' would be a hassle, but it shouldn't be the second time.

HZ: But I meant a step before translation. I am thinking more of those who have no framework to know what to read, what is the canon, what is foundational, what is subversive, or what is widely known to the point of redundancy. There is a point for everyone where they just don't have the map through which they can navigate what they need to read. That is, if they don't develop an understanding of art education that completely dismisses the necessity to read or engage with texts altogether.

EM: In your opinion, did the act of translation help make the knowledge shared and discussed more accessible and/or relatable to the readers?

HZ: It is hard to say. I believe we can criticize theory and language. We can criticize English, or accept it, but engaging with theory needs a different skill set. I believe it is better to sit with a text, understand it and then voice why that does or doesn't suit me, if it's unnecessarily long or unnecessarily complicated. Some participants mentioned that reading—not a specific text, but reading altogether—isn't beneficial for them because their pursuits were visual.

There is a general problem with reading in the context of art education, particularly reading theory, and reading translated theory which can be extremely challenging. But I feel that group readings offer a parallel practice to translation that grounds and contextualizes the texts while creating a space to offer insight into the processes of reception, selection and translation.

To go back to your question on accessibility, I would say yes and no. If I don't speak any English, it is definitely more accessible to read a "difficult" text in Arabic than in a language I don't even know, but I believe we also need to think of why the text is complicated. The reasons would vary between translations that lose some meaning to stay faithful to the original text, or a shortage in Arabic terminology. The source text itself might be unavoidably inaccessible. You would have to think about how to approach an already difficult text and how to navigate this difficulty; without flattening it through simplification or mistranslation.

End Meeting for All

I kept wondering back to one point. Having difficulties engaging with an English text is fine. One can always hide behind the fact that it is their second language, a foreign tongue. But the same couldn't be said about Arabic. It feels like a different layer of frustration when one fails in reading in their language. You can read a sentence very well and understand every word, but as a whole it renders meaningless, which reminded me of how Art Speak sometimes just fails to register.

On the note of locality and self-organization, I remember coming across the Cairo Working Group⁶ in 2017 when they organized a series of workshops entitled “Local Stories of Arts & Learning”. I have previously worked with one of their members, Hussein El-Hajj, on translations for my two recent publications. The most recent was translated collaboratively alongside two of his students in The Translation Lab at Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CILAS). Yet another interesting model to reflect on.

Seeking even more answers, I set out to talk to Hussein El-Hajj, who extended the invitation to Batool El Hennawy with whom he organized CILAS Alexandria.

9 February 2022, 1:00 PM

Meeting w/ Hussein El-Hajj & Batool El Hennawy
Zoom

EM: The two of you coordinated courses with CILAS besides taking part in other educational initiatives. I want to ask you, how can we critically revisit the self-organized structures that we create and contribute to as they evolve?

BH: I believe that education doesn't stop at how it is described. It is a practice. Of course, it is informed by what we call it because language is essential, but there is always a space for rethinking. It is a rich process that resembles the essence of theorization; you enter this theoretical space searching for something, there is analysis and assessment. Oftentimes, the process of revisiting happens in a more organic way, similar to the nature of self-organization. Sometimes it isn't even constructive, but rather deconstructive; to detangle problems and deal with each accordingly.

EM: While navigating these different models and their ever-changing formats, what did you learn about the process of creating and shaping an experience of art education and how 'radical' do you think they were?

BH: We were very attentive to the way we work with participants, and how to communicate certain failures, so that any frustration turns into positioning. There are some power structures that are built on dismissal and seclusion where information is cut out. “What's happened happened”. And if participants were to express their dissatisfaction, they wouldn't generate feedback because of how these structures think of themselves as 'radical'. With CILAS Alex, it was satisfying to see how we were met with forgiveness and understanding when faced with challenges and dead ends, and not in a sentimental way. This is always based on the social contract you propose at the beginning of a program, and how porous, permeable, flexible, and

⁶ As part of “Another Roadmap School”, the group consisted of Nour El Safoury, Hussein El-Hajj, Rana ElNemr, Andrea Thal, who focused on researching local histories of arts education and plotting alternatives.

resilient the program is. And all of these merits are a lot more important than just being ‘radical’.

HH: I agree with Batool that ‘radical’ usually makes promises that aren’t kept. Most people don’t fully grasp what ‘radical’ means. They just know that it is positively different.

BH: We never thought of styling the program as ‘independent’ or ‘alternative’. Rather, we focused on designing a program that departs—on content-level—from the challenge of contextualizing knowledge and responding to certain urges. We try to understand the subject first, then the context, and finally, we try to understand the relationship between both and our relationship to the question of exhibiting—in an analytical way, without necessarily being outcome-driven.

HH: We had to think of how participants can have a space to relate what they are learning to their contexts. CILAS followed a discussion-based learning method and so it was only natural that the conversation would be taken further than what we intended. They needed that to find their understanding and articulation.

EM: Was there at any point conjunctions between the Translation Lab at CILAS and translated theoretical material for the other courses, to make the material shared and discussed a bit more locally rooted and/or relatable to the readers?

HH: There was always this assumption that the translated material would be directly related to the courses taught at CILAS, but this didn’t happen. Instead, the material was related to the philosophy of other similar art education models, the experiments and mechanisms of such. Participants would learn about translation through practice, choose what to work on, and then collectively discuss outcomes.

End Meeting for All

I thought that I would come closer to any answers by having these conversations. After all, these are all people that I shared personal learning experiences with. We have all stood on opposite ends of the learning spectrum at different times. But I felt that with every question asked, they would always ask me to take a step back first, revealing a context that I seemingly missed. That left me even more tired than I was at the beginning. I am tired because I have failed to come closer to understanding the paradoxical relationship between language and knowledge and how one can lead to the creation and shaping of the other. Can a thinking grounded in this duality allow us to understand what is actually at stake with the choices we make as students and educators?

I will ask no more questions, fearing that I will have to take another step back first.