Cross-section of an Unlearning Process

Giuliana Racco spent six months in the South West Bank collaborating with Campus in Camps, a biennial experimental advanced research program based in a refugee camp and involving a group of fifteen young refugees. Tracing the potentialities and problematics of this challenging endeavor, along with the course of theory and intended action, Cross-section of an Unlearning Process hinges on a debate between participants and guests held on the occasion of the program's first annual forum. Looking from within, it provides a gaze which attempts to unravel the motivations, desires and fertile antagonisms driving the people involved in the program and all those attending this event, while presenting a cross-section of a living (un)learning process in progress.

All of us participants are refugees and mostly living in camps, and we know that the way refugees [have been] talking about their issues, their stories, has been the same since the Nakba. This way of representation […] was always and is still characterized by showing refugees as poor people, the victims, the ones who are weak and always needing help from others. But no one narrates our story on a basis of strength... Are we satisfied with the way we are narrating our story or is it time to adopt a new way of representation? The lives of refugees are changing economically, socially and politically; everything except the way we talk about ourselves. I don't have a magical answer to this critical question but I would like to open up this discussion with my colleagues of Campus in Camps and you, who we are glad to have among us today.

With these words, twenty-two year old Ahmad Al-Laham launched the second day of the first annual public forum of the Campus in Camps Program[1] at the al-Feniq Cultural Center of Dheisheh refugee camp[2] on January 16, 2013. Exactly one year earlier, this

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[1] Herein, the focus is on the event of the forum. For an in-depth view of the entire program visit www.campusincamps.ps/en.

[2] Established in the months following the Nakba, Dheisheh is the most populated refugee camp in the Bethlehem area. The hill upon which Dheisheh's main cultural center, al-Feniq, was built has lived through a series of transformations: from 1948 to1967, it served as a Jordanian military base; from 1967 to 1990, following the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the Israeli military civil administration used it as a base; after the Oslo Accords (1993), the Palestinian Authority used the area as a helicopter landing strip and a police station; and finally, pressured by the camp inhabitants, the PA handed the land over to the refugees to use as they desired. A cultural center was established; earning the name Feniq (Arabic for 'phoenix') after it was destroyed by the Israeli army and rebuilt twice over during the second Intifada. For more information concerning the center visit www.campusincamps.ps/en/projects/01-the-garden/

same cultural center officially opened its doors to an experimental education venture. Set in the South West Bank, Campus in Camps kicked off with its first group of fifteen selected participants, including Al-Laham. Rubbing against the grain of the standard aid-based paradigm riddling the area, the program aims to challenge the stereotype of the poor and victimized refugee –an image that has, over sixty-five years, been established and fossilized by both the international community and refugees themselves. In order to investigate and create new forms of representation of contemporary refugees and camp life and to foster the development of critically engaged interventions, rather than provide "assistance" or "training" within the framework of an externally imposed project,[3] it is first necessary to establish solid theoretical and practical bases.

Like most other projects in this socio-political-geographic setting, Campus in Camps is aid-based, receiving its primary funding from the GIZ and support from the UNRWA.[4] Yet, what structurally differs from most other efforts in the area is the involvement and participation of a local university (Al Quds Bard Honors College), the Popular Committees[5] of various refugee camps of the South West Bank and the hosting body, the al-Feniq Cultural Center, without whose support, particularly of the latter two, all the proposed interventions would most likely be rejected on the grounds of normalization.[6] Though attempting to move distinctly from the standard top-down NGO model, the program at times encounters moments when this line is blurred, when speech reverts back to describing the needy refugee, proving how difficult it is to shake off a paradigm and its

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[3] Ilana Feldman discusses this in greater detail in *Aid effects: Palestine refugee reflections on humanitarian sociality, responsibility, and identity*, co-authored with Nida Hmouz, Bisan Jaffari, Ahmad Al-Laham, Qussay Abu Acker, Isshaq Al-Barbary, and Naba Al-Assi. (Unpublished manuscript)

[4] GIZ (Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) is a German International Collaboration program. UNRWA (The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) is an entity which, in the refugees' eyes, is both witness to their cause and guilty of failing to provide adequate material support. This was confirmed through interviews conducted by program participants with other members of the camp community, under the guidance of Ilana Feldman and forming the basis of the paper *Aid effects: Palestine refugee reflections on humanitarian sociality, responsibility, and identity.*

[5] The Popular Committees, or Local Committees, are the appointed governing bodies of refugee camps.

[6] The concept of normalization in the West Bank and Gaza generally refers to all that which 'normalizes' relations with the occupation. However, the program's concentration on refugee camps focuses more specifically on understanding the normalization of camps, or rather their potential blending into the surrounding cities and, thus, consequent loss of exceptionality: if camps become cities, the claim to the Right of Return is eroded.

related language; how difficult it is, in the words of the program's founders, to "decolonize the mind".[7]

A year after its inception, a forum was held in order to understand the state of the program and to dialogue with the community. On the occasion of an official public event, an open discussion spanning the course of two days provided the chance for the participants to present their ideas, research and the (un)learning process hitherto undergone. The first evening was moderated by the participants and some figures of the camp communities who supported the program and, thus, unfolded in Arabic before an audience mainly of camp inhabitants. Since one of the most vital aspects of the program is to encourage camp connectedness and to analyze the borders between camp and city and between the camps themselves, special care was taken to include refugees from more distant areas and to ensure that representatives of the Popular Committees were present. The second day, instead, was voiced in English before a public comprised of organizations, journalists, researchers and academics, who had in some way informed the course over its first year, as well as curious visitors. Though both events were equally crucial, the focus herein pivots on this second day, when a number of issues were tackled including that of universal knowledge, problematizing the framework of both the traditional and contemporary university.[8] Instead, emphasis was placed on revalorizing the concept of *al-jame'ah*, or rather, the Arabic term for gathering place, therefore a collective public space, which in the twentieth century also became the term for university. If, on the one hand, a strong will was expressed to challenge the "modern superstition"[9] of universal knowledge, perceived as a homologizing force aimed at

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[7] Two of the program's co-founders, Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal, make clear reference to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's seminal text "Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature" (1986), creating an analogy between the experimental educational process concerning contemporary Palestinian camps and the Kenyan theorist's work on the liberation from Eurocentric culture.

[8] Here I make a distinction between the historic European concept of university, described by Johan Huizinga as originating at the end of the 11th century from the "all-consuming thirst for knowledge of life and everything that existed" of young Western countries (*Homo Ludens, a study of the play element in culture* (1955), orig. ed. 1939) and the contemporary version in its corporate and globalizing manifestation, predominantly of Anglo-Saxon heritage.

[9] These are the words Munir Fasheh, third program co-founder, former professor of mathematics and founder of the Arab Educational Forum within Harvard University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies. Fasheh's mentorship guided the students along a path that is strongly critical of both the traditional and contemporary university system. The fertile tension created by his perspective, often at odds with that of the many invited academics - active members and forerunners of their departments in various states - is characteristic of the program.

reducing all "other" experiences for the sake of a global consensus, on the other, there is the risk of falling into the traps of what Paolo Freire described as "losing oneself in the disconnectedness of practice."[10]

The experiment hypothesizes that the process by which the experience is being carried out includes moments of encounter and discussion with different realities. In fact, one of the most difficult and essential aspects is precisely the attempt to create a space where academic and more experiential knowledge production are agonistic, resulting in socially-engaged interventions with solid conceptual backing in a site with exceptional characteristics, what Freire described as "[n]either a theoretic elitism [n]or a practice ungrounded in theory, but the unity between theory and practice."[11] It is also important to note that the interdisciplinary nature of the research spans the fields of sociology, anthropology, urbanism, art and literature. And though the attempt to create a new pedagogical program focused on the intersecting space between theory, practice, art, life and politics has already been tried[12], what makes this experiment remarkable are precisely a series of context-specific factors. First and foremost, the threat of normalization hovering over the entire experience is the basis for perpetual debate concerning any issue that touches upon improvement of life in the camps and the well-being of the inhabitants; reason why the collaboration with the al-Feniq center and the Popular Committees is essential. Secondly, the program itself takes place in (a) refugee camp(s), thus in an exceptional space located already within a non-recognized state.[13] In fact, it immediately became evident that it was necessary to analyze the notion of citizenship, or rather *mwatana*, as translated by the participants. A third issue therefore

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[10] Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race in *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 65, no. 3, fall 1995, p. 382. The more extended quote reads: "We must not negate practice for the sake of theory. To do so would reduce theory to a pure verbalism or intellectualism. By the same token, to negate theory for the sake of practice…is to run the risk of losing oneself in the disconnectedness of practice."

[11] Ibid.

[12] Claire Bishop outlines a history of artists "working at the interface of art and pedagogy" in Pedagogic Projects: 'How do you bring a classroom to life as if it were a work of art?, ninth chapter of *Artificial Hells* (Verso, 2012). It is important to recall that two of the founding members of Campus in Camps are co-founders of DAAR (Decolonizing Architecture and Art Residency), which has achieved considerable note in the international art circuit through major exhibitions.

[13] Palestine only became a recognized non-member state of the UN on November 29, 2012, a decision which won the favor of 139 countries, was abstained by 41 and opposed only by Canada, Czech Republic, Israel, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Panama and the United States.

concerns how non-citizens can feel accountable for a space legally suspended in a paradoxical condition of permanent temporariness resulting in their very absence of citizenship. The lands upon which the camps were established were "rented" by the UN for an undefined amount of time and therefore no refugee legally owns his or her own house. From this perspective, questions concerning ownership appear fundamental. Consequently, in a condition where there is an absence of private property, issues concerning public space, as traditionally understood, reach vertiginous levels of complexity and thus the interventions felt the need to shift toward the common domain. Another factor that must be reckoned with is the condition of dependency, hence of passivity, provoked by over sixty-five years of humanitarian aid and the presence of global and increasingly politically neutral NG_Os. And finally, there reigns the struggle to maintain the desire to continue working despite the checkpoints, raids, teargas, clashes, not to mention a seven-day attack on nearby Gaza[14], on the one hand, and the protests, strikes and political disorder on the other; all part and parcel of a regular day for the participants of this experimental university in exile, and not only. These are just some of the elements that weave the tightrope along which everyone involved in the project has walked and must continue walking in order to realize interventions and produce knowledge that truly manage to overcome fossilized notions. Rather than seeing these aspects as limits and perpetuating the idea and image of victimhood, the participants and collaborators of the program work together to draw strength from the "steadfastness" which also characterizes the context and the players.

Within this conceptual framework and facing these dilemmas, the mixed group of participants and guests conducted an animated discussion concerning methodologies of knowledge production over the course of the two-day forum. The following are excerpts from the second day's seminar; not all of those who took part in the discussion are cited, but those whose words are directly reported, in order of speech, are: Ahmad Al-Laham (Dheisheh refugee camp), Isshaq Al-Barbary (Beit Jibreen refugee camp), Nida Hmouz (Fawwar refugee camp), Aysar Al-Saifi (Dheisheh refugee camp), Ayat Al-Turshan

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[14] Operation Pillar of Defense, carried out by the Israeli Defense Force from November 14th to 21st, 2012, resulted in the civilian deaths of 167 Palestinian and 4 Israelis.

(Fawwar refugee camp), Murad Ouda (Dheisheh refugee camp), Alaa Hiloo (local guest) Sari Hanafi (Professor of sociology and Chair, Department of Sociology, Anthropology & Media Studies, American University of Beirut), Khaldun Bashra (Conservation architect and anthropologist, co-director of RIWAQ center for architectural conservation, Ramallah), Umar Al-Ghubari (Zochorot Tour coordinator), Munir Fasheh (mentor within the Campus in Camps program, director of the Arab Education Forum at Harvard University, Cambridge University) and Gudrun Kramer (head of the "Social and Cultural Fund for Palestinian Refugees and Gaza Population" for the "Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit" (GIZ).

Following Al- Laham's above-cited introduction, the participants took turns expressing their relative interpretations of the (un)learning process:

Isshaq: …basically, the path we took in terms of learning was something we call neighboring… in Arabic we call it mujawara, *where the fifteen of us sit together, also with architects and other guests, and we discuss together and produce knowledge.*

Nida: … and the process of unlearning is one of the most significant features of Campus in Camps… we concentrate on contextual language, that is, language that fits the context and the situation of our lives as refugees.

Aysar: As a result of our collective learning and our unlearning process, we produce knowledge that comes from inside, not from outside. And what we mean by this is to look to ourselves as a source of meaning and from this meaning create and define according to our experience and our lives here in the camp. Maybe the knowledge that is suitable here is not suitable outside. Why should I build my life according to other peoples' definitions? Why don't I create my own knowledge that is suitable for my life?

In order to tangibly explain how this process of redefinition takes place, the tool of the *Collective Dictionary* was introduced: an open-ended series of booklets analyzing essential aspects of contemporary Palestinian camp life, elucidated through written reflections on interviews, excursions and photographic investigations. At the one-year mark, the roll call of terms included ownership, sustainability, common, relation, participation, knowledge, well-being and responsibility. This print instrument both provides a useful entry point and represents the process of communal learning based on

the Freirian ideal of the marriage between theory and practice, hinging on contextual knowledge.

Isshaq: Perhaps I can give an example: the village of Battir, which is about twenty minutes from here, has a week consisting of eight days, simply because there are eight different families in the village [who] work in the field of agriculture, all sharing one main water source. Each farm claims one day a week, so each day of the week carries the name of a specific family. In this manner, the community of this village articulates the way they live in order to match their lives. I chose to work on two terms: "common" and "well-being" … in refugee camps you can't find the "private", therefore we started to look for cases of the "common"… here in refugee camps. Based on the fact that the camp is the exception, we live in a state of exception and we do not submit to direct rule of the Palestinian Authority, and not even UNRWA... so it's the people's responsibility to organize their lives within the refugee camps...

Aysar: …and we were wondering why the camp is still the core of people's lives even when they leave to live in other places. This is one question we are investigating through interviews.

After establishing the conceptual problematics and the main terms that each participant had been researching, the group went on to delineate their initiatives beginning to take shape from their year's worth of reflections. The initiatives to be carried out in the camps of Dheisheh, Arroub and Fawwar as well as nearby Doha City[15] are collectively activated by the participants and camp inhabitants and the various collaborators of the program.[16] Their nature mainly concerns the identification and enhancement of common spaces through community-driven activities. Geographically speaking, Arroub and Fawwar camps (near Hebron) are not distant from Dheisheh (near Bethlehem). However, inadequate transportation conditions and frequent roadblocks resulting from the occupation make it difficult for some of the participants to reach the al-Feniq Center. Cut off, these camps are considered rural and, consequently, more conservative than Dheisheh, Beit Jibreen and Aida camps.[17] Thus, the two female members from 'far-off' Fawwar, not only faced logistic difficulties, but also a stronger social pressure with

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[15] Doha City, a municipality in front of Dheisheh, was almost completely established by refugees and named after the capital of Qatar which sponsored much of the construction.

[16] A more complete presentation of the initiatives can be found on the official website www.campusincamps.ps.

[17] Aida, Beit Jibreen and Dheisheh are the refugee camps located in the urbanized area of Bethlehem.

respect to their counterparts from Dheisheh, particularly while organizing an outdoor all-woman public event:

Nida: I have to say that as women, we felt totally marginalized. So we decided that we, the women of the camp, wanted to occupy the plaza of Fawwar. I believe that if we want to change ourselves, we don't have to say that 'this is a limit or this is a constraint', we have to just do it and we have to be courageous enough to challenge whatever will happen to us...

Ayat: … 'Nida and Ayat were making a revolution in the camp.' We succeeded in gathering more than one hundred women in the plaza. We have a stereotype about women, that we are stressed, that we can't share together in a common place in our camp, which is different from Dheisheh camp. We hope that now women in Fawwar will be strong enough to use the plaza for themselves…

Nida: …something funny happened to us while we were preparing for the event. They told us, 'There will be talk about you in the mosque'. As if we were a scandal in the camp. So we said, 'Let them talk. We will become famous!'

Sari: Was there any talk in the mosque? (laughter)

Ayat: Really, women at first were very frightened, but we also invited some women from the Deir Balut agricultural cooperative who are excellent cooks and make their own maftoul *by hand. They shared their knowledge with the other women. And even some neighbors who were not initially involved in the event came out and brought coffee.*

However, at this halfway point only few projects had reached the stage of actual interventions in public space, such as the above-described transformation of the newly-built square in Fawwar and the first interventions concerning the Herodian Pool of Arroub refugee camp, involving a two-day trek searching for the traces of an Ancient Roman aqueduct followed by a day of cleaning the pool itself. This difficulty in reaching more advanced stages is symptomatic of three main factors, the first of which concerns the heterogeneous educational backgrounds of the participants. All but one hold an official university degree, but only few operate in creative or exploratory fields,[18] resulting in an initial lack of experimental and intuitive project planning and development skills, as well as a lack of understanding of the values of these. Hence, the presence of the

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[18] Among these, a visual artist, a video-maker and a self-taught novelist.

somewhat oddly named project activators[19], the external inter-disciplinary practitioners of architecture, art, design and anthropology, hired within the program. Placed in a delicate zone of discussing and activating the initiatives with the participants without imposing their ideas, the most fruitful experiences resulted in horizontal collaborations for the limited amounts of time dictated by visa regulations.[20] Secondly, the entire 'unlearning' process, the theoretical cornerstone of the initiatives, itself is a slow and cautious practice and trust in one's own intuitions is by nature built up through trial and error. Thirdly, the previously cited contextual aspects including the humanitarian aid-induced passivity fear of normalization, and daily dealings with the arbitrariness and violence of the occupation provide little encouragement.[21] Though most of the initiatives were still in a more conceptual phase, the site-specific research driving them permitted a lively discussion around the terms and notions analyzed:

Alaa: I have a question concerning the concepts you studied, which are really related to each other and to Palestinians and the way we live. Through your studies, have you tried to research any kind of literature on these concepts? Like the idea of al-o'una*, or common, in Palestinian history before the refugee camps? Because these things existed and we have our own understanding, as Palestinians, of these concepts. [Also] have you done interviews with elders from the refugee camps about that? The other thing is about the Palestinization of these concepts. For example,* al-o'una, *which generally would be understood as voluntary work, is not voluntary work.* Al-o'una *is something forcible on you if you are capable of doing something: because people will help you, but if you don't help them, you're kind of out of the community. The other concept is citizenship; if we take an academic understanding of the word citizenship or a legal understanding, we're not citizens and we never learned to be citizens. We were occupied and we learned how not to obey. If I were to give a translation for the word* mwatana*, I would say "nationalism" or "nation-related" more than "citizenship".*

Expressed by a young local city-dweller, these questions clearly concern the relationship of the participants' refugee-centered concepts to the more generalized yet nonetheless complex condition of 'being Palestinian'. The forum provided an important moment of

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[19] Not only the project activators, but also the mentors, project coordinators, invited researchers, administrators and staff dialogued collectively with the participants concerning their initiatives, thus enhancing the communal knowledge production process.

[20] The period of permanence of the foreign project activators is limited to the three-month, somewhat renewable visa issued by Israel.

[21] Symptomatic of this is that, despite scholarships and support from local institutions, from an initial group of fifteen selected participants, at the half-way point the number had dropped to thirteen and by the end of the second year, to twelve.

confrontation. As an exercise in testing the flexibility of the approach, it was fundamental to verifying the soundness of the research. Only by being drawn beyond the protective cocoon of its own structure, in order to face up to broader questions, can the process applied be driven to bear greater significance, rather than remain closed, auto-referential and exclusive. While the previous evening's public consisted mainly of the camp community – those who will directly be affected by the interventions – mainly engaging in the participants' discourses for the first time, this second day was decisively marked by a stronger accent on the various disciplinary perspectives of voices strongly aware of the theoretical discourse and having, in some way, previously dialogued with the participants. This crucial moment of explaining the investigation of specific terms to the mixed audience was thus a necessary step in consolidating the very foundation of each intervention.

Sari: I have two points. The first concerns the way I hear the camp described as a space of exception. I feel that you interiorize this. Slowly, slowly you say, "we are exceptional", I am afraid, correct me if I'm wrong, it becomes, "this is why we need special knowledge, because we are exceptional." While the camps and their state or space of exception is actually to reject this state of exceptionality and say "no we don't want the sovereign to suspend the law when it concerns us." I would like to ask someone to problematize this. The second point is about the term citizenship. I didn't understand if this exercise of the Collective Dictionary *is to say, "we will create a new definition of the word citizenship or to take this universalizing concept – and I insist on the word universalizing – and show how it does not apply in the camps. I am a social scientist and my profession has meaning because some concepts are universal. My current work in Lebanon is on the relationship between religious knowledge and what is called scientific knowledge. I want to keep saying that there are universal things and then I will show you, as a sociologist, that in everyday practice, the different layers of power are not applying this concept to me. This makes sense to me, that you start from basic points: what is the meaning of national?; what is the meaning of citizenship? Like Hannah Arendt did, and then see if the Palestinian National Authority treats me, as a camp dweller in Dheisheh or in Fawwar, really as a citizen or as a second-class citizen. What does it mean that there is no infrastructure project in my camp? So here I want to understand better, do you invent the concept or do you situate the concept in your experience?*

Khaldun: Two questions… how do you free yourself from the knowledge you produce when you create the Collective Dictionary*? And how can this knowledge help us critique the off-camp policies, that is, how the authority treats the people, the citizens outside of the camp?*

Munir: I want to return to the universal aspect…earlier I spoke about modern superstitions. One superstition is that if I think something is good for me, I can impose it without feeling I am doing something harmful. For me, Quakers are probably the best-intentioned people. But they have the virus and the virus is: what is good in America, what is good in Philadelphia in particular, is good in Ramallah. This is the universal claim, which is also true about physics, about math, about social sciences. I taught math for a long time and I really thought I was doing a good job… Now, my mother, she never really went to school, she never wrote her name, but she made clothes for thousands of women. She worked for fifty years making clothes. NO woman is universal in her shape. A straight line is universal... and all that my mother needed for fifty years was this measuring tape... and it fit ten thousand women…and probably the Egyptians built their pyramids using string. So we should be careful. In my opinion fundamentalism starts with academia, not with religion. And in particular, it starts with math; math which I studied and taught for many years. And now I can consider that I committed a crime against many students who understood math in different ways. But I forced them to accept my math, because I claimed and I believed the superstition that knowledge is universal. Knowledge is not universal. And mathematics which I think is about the mystical side of life, the spiritual side of life, has been turned into a kind of mechanical, technical knowledge, which can kill but cannot really help people be happy.

Fasheh's skepticism toward academia – after a lifetime within an elite international university circuit – is aimed at dispelling the acclaim of hegemonic knowledge, encouraging the participants to build up faith in their own intuitive intelligence. Meanwhile, the role of Kramer, head of the Social and Cultural Fund for Palestinian Refugees and Gaza Population of GIZ is delicate, as she must communicate and translate the merits of such an experimental, local knowledge-centered project to a foreign organization obviously interested in results in order to justify spending. Thus, she functions as a mediator between two distinct but inter-dependent realities, those of founder and funder.

Gudrun: Now probably there is no universal knowledge but maybe there are universal questions, and these are questions that I consider more on a meta-level. I ask myself every day: "Why do I regard something as right and why do I regard something as wrong"; "Why do I regard something as beautiful and why do I regard something as ugly?" and so on. So now my question: "By engaging in these concepts, did you also have these moments where you yourself questioned your own assumptions or did you put your own assumptions all into the concepts? Because usually when you deeply engage it's not a one-way process that you only shape the concepts. So I also would be interested in how these concepts and how the engagement with the concepts shaped and probably changed you in your assumptions."

The ensuing debate focused specifically on the notion of exceptionality, fundamental to any work in a refugee camp. Within this concept lies one of the thorniest points of the entire program: How can knowledge produced 'away' from dominant discourse merge with action in a manner that is able to contribute to the more general issue of active management of one's own representation in a condition of oppression and conflict? This stubborn friction between local and universal knowledge, involving questions of criteria and relativism has proven to be one of the most difficult kinks to iron out and, perhaps, cannot be flattened entirely.

Khaldun: I would like to ask you something. It seems that you produce knowledge not for the sake of knowledge itself, isn't it so? There is a political end to Campus in Camps, I hope.

Isshaq: I would like to answer the first question in relation to the concept of common…we call our proposed actions initiatives rather than projects, and this is based on the idea that the common already exists and we are just enhancing it. And to be honest with you, as Palestinians, we are subject to different kinds of occupation; not only the physical one, there is a knowledge occupation that remains hidden and that's very much what is individualizing the society. Within our opinion, the common is a way to enhance the collectivism that already exists within refugee camps. And now I will jump to the question concerning the camp as an exceptional space. We are not completely separating the camp from the rest of society however it is true that the camp does not submit to direct rule from the Palestinian Authority, so it's an exception from this perspective. And the social and intellectual fabric inside the refugee communities is different from that in the cities. That's how I see the refugee camps as exceptional.

Murad: I think the camp politically should be considered an exception, because if it isn't an exception it will be normalized into the city. We are speaking about political representation, about the exceptionality of the camp, about how we could represent ourselves as refugees within the Palestinian cities or villages or with other Palestinians who are not refugees, in order to save our right of return.

Ahmad: If we look at camps in the West Bank and Gaza, obviously we can see that people in the camps are taking a major role in decision-making in all the associations, not only in the camps, but also in the cities. There is not one bridge between the camp and the city, but hundreds of bridges. The exceptionality of the camp does not mean that the camp is separated. And even if we agree, and we all agree, that there is a political elite, now the refugees are part of that political elite. If we look at the PA itself, we will find that there are refugees there who are making decisions. Refugees are not building a shield. We are not saying that nobody is like us and nobody can talk to us, that we are elite…And again, to touch upon the concept of universal, we can agree that throughout the world there are hundreds and thousands of common concepts and definitions that most people will agree

upon, but we can't [neglect] that we might have some definitions that very directly touch our lives that don't fit here. So we have to reconsider how we deal with these concepts....

Umar: One comment regarding the knowledge. What you [are saying] here is a kind of resistance to what exists today. It's like decolonizing knowledge. What is considered universal today is actually what is Western. And what you are saying is "I have my OWN knowledge and this is not considered today." I have some interest in this universal thing and I think it is a very important phase or step that you are taking. The other important thing is that I think you are dealing with the identity of the refugees. Even in saying, "I don't want to accept the traditional idea of the refugee as a victim, as poor, as someone who always needs help" – ultimately, with handicaps – "I want to place myself on the ground. I want to shape knowledge and political resistance in my way. I want to change the concept of refugee from a poor man to a man who is doing things and taking responsibility for his life and his political steps". But still, what I have heard until now from these presentations is a dealing with the present, dealing with how "I can empower myself as a refugee and take responsibility and change the concept about me." I didn't hear anyone talking about return. And I want to ask you how you see the return of the refugees, and following this, I want to ask you how you see Doha City in this line of return.

Nida: Before Campus in Camps I used to say "my return", as in "my return to the village of '48", which is Beit Jibreen. But now I think that I have the right to return to Haifa, Akka, and all the cities and villages that are located in the occupied land. So my vision toward return became more common than my previous idea, which was based on an idea of __my__ own land and __my__ own property in Beit Jibreen. I thought that I wanted to go to the land that my ancestors had lived on... I wanted to return to the well that we had, the farm and all these things. But now I think "why can't I go to Akka, for example, and live there?" So I see the Palestinian land as stretching from the Jordan River to the [Mediterranean] sea. All of this is mine and I can live wherever I want.

Umar: What we say now is not "return to the land", but "return to the homeland".

The relation of the mid-program forum serves to expose the inspirations, movements and tensions operating within a living unlearning process. We witness an interdisciplinary debate in which the various perspectives respectfully attempt to grasp and grapple with a form that, by nature, is flexible, fleeting and in a state of constant and critical redefinition. One of the primary aims of the entire program concerns the development of a communal learning practice able to deconstruct the idea of top-down NGO-style implementation where outside agents impose internationally approved projects on passive subjects. Beyond the aggressive or oppressive forces of colonization of space, body and mind, here, dependency on seemingly neutral humanitarian-aid agencies as well as standardized

forms of learning are also called into question. Through the redefinition of concepts, the initiatives are conceived to change the self-representation, augmenting the sense of personal and collective responsibility for the changes occurring in the camps. Nonetheless, in order to facilitate the participants' identification and elaboration of the features of refugee life to be enhanced, the program relied on outside funding, theoretical guidance and infrastructure. Thus, even this attempt to supplant the notion of refugees as victims dependent on seemingly neutral humanitarian aid from outside – perpetuating the idea of helplessness and oppression – requires some forms of international "assistance". Along with the academic-non-academic friction, this presents the main theoretical hitch along the path of the two-year experimental course, particularly considering that the program *is* supported by a strong international network, including an official university.

Furthermore, the program, though situated in an exceptional context, fits into a somewhat recent tradition of experiments operating on the border of art and pedagogy and aimed at fostering a critical and politicized conscience. Thus, certain affinities with tendencies of socially-engaged and community based art practices cannot be ignored. Since part of the program's unlearning and critical knowledge production processes also attempt to build faith in values connected to creativity and intuition, I will now hazard some considerations. In view of the utilitarian nature of the interventions, how can the vital tension between art and activism be preserved, considering the situation of conflict and control? How can people manage their own means and forms of representation, rather than have them imposed from beyond or above – including those practitioners, academics and institutions which offer support and consultation – while nonetheless establishing some form of criteria? And, how can the traps of excessive self-referentiality, elitism and closure be sidestepped in order for the knowledge produced to be relevant beyond the delimited context?

The second year continued to sound out the slippery relationship between politics, pedagogy, interventions concerning social practice and spatial transformation as well as the effects and risks of institutional support, in terms of normalizing the exceptionality of

conditions of conflict and control. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the entire program is that all of the actors involved face the immense challenge of creating sustainable and sound interventions for today that function as tools for a 'real return' tomorrow. Thus, the projects should be perceived as ways of laying down the foundations for enjoyable and fertile scenarios of an end to the occupation. At this point, it is difficult to assess how many initiatives will effectively take off. Some may not come to fruition but may serve to inspire others. Though there are many grey areas, what remains clear and drives this experiment is the conviction that knowledge is definitely an arm for struggling against oppression and thus *does* have a political purpose. It is the most important and powerful tool in understanding how not to identify with the oppressor and replicate their behavior, institutions and thought-patterns. Furthermore, the management of self-representation is not only a way to ensure the telling of one's own story but it is also an assumption of responsibility of one's methods of action. Fundamental to asserting one's claims, it is a necessarily human desire.