

Another Roadmap for Art Education

Interwining Hi/stories

Foundations for an art education research-practice to re-engage Freire in Zurich

INTRO

Since November 2015 I've been working at the Johann Jacobs Museum in Zurich as mediator. The museums' mission is to elaborate on global trade routes, its interrelations with societies and their cultural hybrids that develop along those routes and their bypasses. These hybrid forms can include anything from sublime works of art to everyday objects or social practice. For the mediation it is most important to collaborate with persons who intentionally, or sometimes unintentionally, have gained knowledge and other experiences about these contexts, or who want to deepen their knowledge on it. Methodologically the works of Paulo Freire, especially his thinking on action and reflection within his concept of dialogue based education, are key for my practice at the museum.

One of my first talks with museum's employees to get to know the institution, lead me to Dorianio Simonato, the caretaker of the museum's building. He then told me that he had been a teacher for almost thirty years at a place called SPE – vocational school of the Emigrants (Scuola Professionale Emigrati) – till this school had to close down. Further he told that he is very familiar with Paulo Freire's methodology as all teachers there used to work with it. Also, the schools' director Luciano Persico was in contact with Freire. That of course made me very curious. So, coming up with participating in the research on Paulo Freire in Switzerland, I explained the intention of the project and asked Dorianio if he and Luciano would give us an interview on SPE's work. Thereby I figured out, that even if the school closed down almost 15 years ago, there is still a group of four former teachers regularly meeting and discussing socio-political topics. But even if they got to know about the socio-political attitude of Re-engaging Freire, they were still not willed to give an interview. The reason was that they had in particular made the experience to invest a lot of time in exchanging ideas on education practice with other art researchers without being finally interesting enough. Yet, they told me that they had handed over all school material to the Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv (Swiss social archive), where I found a four-meter shelf unit filled with it. And they offered to talk to us after there will have been some more substantial steps made towards the practice research for discussing on experiences within each's particular context.

While figuring out that there had been a school in Zurich working with reference to Freire's body of work, I attended a public talk, organised by the alternative art space Les complices*

and the women's group of ASZ (Autonomous School Zurich)¹. I supposed I would get to know there more about SPE and its environment, because the talk was with (Italian) migrant women in Zurich in the 1960ies-1980ies, about their self-organisation and learning efforts in comparison to the nowadays situation. But neither the women of those former days nor the younger generation knew about SPE at all. On the contrary, ASZ- women were very interested in learning more about SPE. ASZ itself came into being from an activist refugee background in 2008 and nowadays focuses on teaching German. Within the ASZ there has through the years been a politically engaged wing who, concerning learning methods, strongly refers to Freire, too. And those people are as well constantly trying to develop their knowledge on these learning methods.

In the moment of starting this art education practice research on reengaging Freire, I addressed the women's group of ASZ as well as one further association for a collaboration: FIZ is an organisation giving advocacy and support for migrant women and victims of trafficking². Within their program they offer a language course run by persons from the ASZ women's group.

After first conversations with both groups, there is currently the intention to build a working group of four (me, two persons of ASZ and one of FIZ) to define the frame of and develop a basic idea for an ongoing workshop with FIZ-language course. My intention from a museum's perspective is to make use of objects and artworks of the museum, to work on Freire's topic of generative images and to try to engage this concept within the particular context. In the best case we will hereby develop new particular generative images or objects which are useful as a tool for the FIZ language courses and museum education.

To do so, we will first reflect on selected extracts from Freire's texts and earlier pedagogical practices by SPE. From my side, I will therefore bring inputs from at least two sources: documents and ideas from the SPE-archive and text extracts on Freire's method of generative images. There are two further options which have not been definitely fixed yet: objects of the Lina Bo Bardi-exhibition from the Johann Jacobs museum and knowledge about women who were important for Freire's body of work. Women, who might have supported, collaborated or motivated his contents and research. Could their works and convictions also be an interesting point to discuss with the women language learners of FIZ?

WHAT HAS BEEN FOUND

According to this idea, different paths were followed in the research. Here I will only first focus on the archive of SPE. The SPE archive has been explored to find out more about their

¹ For further information (in German only): <http://www.papierlosezeitung.ch/files/2016-09/papierlose-zeitung-7-2015.pdf>

² For further information: <http://www.fiz-info.ch/en/Counseling-Center-for-Migrant-Women->

practice referring to the teaching/learning-methodologies and also their socio-political environment and interests. Secondly, I refer to the findings on Elza Freire as one of the women connected to Paulo Freire as far as it has been possible with German and English language only.

PLOT 1. The archive of SPE

It is the 27th of April in 1974. In the city centre of Zurich a demonstration marches from Ausstellungsstrasse to Lavaterstrasse. Everything is well arranged. The protesters, teachers and students of the vocational school ENAIP, resist with posters and information flyers against their school administration whom they blame for working for their personal interests to the disadvantage of quality at school and in lessons.³

The demonstration of 49 out of 52 teachers and round about 200 students marks the end of failed negotiations with deputies of Italian union and government for guarantying financially secured and high quality lessons.

Immediately after, the same teachers and students founded a new vocational school -SPE. At the core of this, there lay the claim for educational opportunities, which would meet the demands of those Italian youth properly, who had to come to Switzerland with their parents looking for work: A school which would enable them, in spite of unfavourable material and socio-structural circumstances plus language obstacles, to receive a professional diploma – a diploma comparable to those of the Swiss majority for escaping enduring grunt work. And finally a school which after all would consider humane and socio-political education as important as vocational training.

During the following years teachers developed together with students and their parents the SPE's curricula and methodology. Therefore, they referred to the newest alternative pedagogical concepts of those days, namely those of Paulo Freire and Lorenzo Milani⁴. As mentioned, the main body of the written and visual material nowadays has been kept at the Sozialarchiv witnessing the pedagogical and political work of SPE. Yet, exactly those documents which contained many of the pedagogical visual works, disappeared in the year 2010.

³ Comp. App 1. Abspaltungsbrief ENAIP, Demo-Aufruf, Demonstration Transparente. Aufschriften

⁴ More about Lorenzo Milani can be found here, e.g.:

https://www.academia.edu/1745940/Letter_to_a_Teacher_Lorenzo_Milanis_contribution_to_critical_citizenship; SPE specifically refers to his 1970-publication *Lettera a una Professoressa*, which is available as open source at http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/LTAT_Final.pdf. Those letters which can be understand as the result of his pedagogical work at *Scuola di Barbiana* (1955-1967).

What has remained of it and what was found by me so far, are: a series of diapositives referring to the students' Italian backgrounds and arrivals in Switzerland combined with written stories for an audio book (carried out in 1984-85 and 1986-87) as well as illustrations of a story concerning a thief. There is more material on German lessons and the vocational training itself. Categories under which this material could be divided are: tasks for essays on personal experiences (of working lives), e.g. how they spend their work breaks, what to do on the international Labor day, how they celebrate Christmas in Italy and Switzerland. Furthermore, there can be found exercises for essays and topics for discussions, taking position, descriptions and accident reports. There are shared reflections of the teachers, called animators, on particular students, and their teaching/learning methods, as well as class observations of so called mentors, meaning some other teachers of the school. There was material which is lost but archived as content reflecting together with students on the very special organisation of SPE. These reflections are also verified by a press article. Press work was another field of work assumed important for the political recognition of SPE, being well documented.

Around 1979, SPE started referring to Paulo Freire to examine if his methodology is transferable to SPE and its context. At the same time networking with AG SPAK⁵ and within this in Arbeitskreis Pädagogik Paulo Freire/ Europäische Arbeitsgemeinschaft Bewusstseinsbildung began.⁶ While being successful in establishing Freire's methodologies in lessons and the students being successful with passing the official final exams, SPE had to fight for official recognition of the latter repeatedly, and therefore also for the school's material resources.

As SPE used to be financed in balance by the Canton of Zurich and the Italian government, the changing political landscape at the Eurasian continent after 1989 and again after 1998 made it difficult to sustain: Lots of the school's students now came from countries which didn't exist anymore, were in labile state condition or were not able to pay anything for their citizens abroad. Italy didn't want to pay anymore for none-Italian students. In Switzerland on the other side, even if there were strong supporters on the administrative operative side, the political will to keep this extraordinary education project alive was missing. In 1998, due to these facts, it became clear that SPE had to close down. Till 2003 the last enrolled students graduated.

⁵ Webpage in German only: <http://www.agspak.de/index.php/ag-spak-wer-wir-sind>

⁶ More about those groups' aims and interconnections comp. also Kira Funke(2010), p.238/239.



Images: Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv. Archive signature 429: Berufsschule der Emigrierten, Scuola Professionale Emigrati SPE

PLOT 2. Women around Paulo Freire, focussed on Elza Freire:

„We cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become subjects.“
(Freire quoted in bell hooks, p. 46)

As most probably working with a group of women, it could be also of interest, which role women played for Paulo Freire's theories:

Although there has been a lot of feminist critique on Paulo Freire's sexist language and his "phallogocentric paradigm of liberation" (bell hooks, p. 48), there are particular feminist voices who strongly argue for his acknowledgement in order to make (political) use of his approaches.⁷ bell hooks for example responds to feminist critiques of Freire:

"I think it's important and significant that (...) Paulo recognizes that he must play a role in feminist movements. This he declares in *Learning to Question*:

«If the women are critical, they have to accept our contribution as men, (...) because it is a duty and right that I have to participate in the transformation of society. Then, if the women must have the main responsibility in their struggle they have to know that their struggle also belongs to us, that is, to those men who don't accept the machista position in the world. »"

(bell hooks, p.57)

bell hooks also writes about her personal relation to Paulo Freire as critical friendship and underlines the "profound solidarity" (bell hooks, p. 58) which leaps to her mind first of all.

Another crucial figure in Freire's life which was according to Gadotti most important to his development was his wife Elza. Yet there is very few information on her found in my research restricted to English and German language only.⁸ Here are the few facts collected:

Elza was Paulo's first wife with whom she had five children. Although Elza has been a most influential figure and actively participated as accomplice in Freire's lectures and work in general, she has so far mostly been portrayed as practitioner, thus receiving essentially less recognition than Paulo. Just in 1985 she received, together with Paulo, the prize for Outstanding Christian Educators of the Christian Educators Association in the USA.⁹ Only twenty years after Elza passed away in Sao Paulo in 1986, the first biography on her

⁷ Comp. e.g. the chapter on the Freire reception of critical pedagogy in Kira Funke (2010).

⁸ There might be more literature found in Portuguese or even Spanish, but this yet has not accessible to me due to missing language skills. I would be very happy about more information.

⁹ Daniel Schugurensky (2011): *Continuum Library of educational thought. Paulo Freire*, London/ New York: continuum international publishing group, P.114.

„Pedagogia da Convivência: Elza Freire - Uma Vida Que Faz Educação“ was published in Portuguese.

It could have been different, maybe. Born Elza Maria Costa de Oliviera, in the 1940ies she and some of her fellow students at Recife University, among them Noemia de Araújo Varela, published a magazine on education. Noemia in turn was later on one of the founding figures of the Movimento Escolinha de Arte (MEA) and is said to be the intellectual parent of Ana Mae Barbosa, together with Paulo Freire.¹⁰

Elza met Paulo while he was studying at the Faculty of Law in Recife, and became an important force in his life. They married in 1944. Gadotti asserts that it was Elza who influenced Freire to intensely pursue his studies, and helped him to elaborate his educational methods. The elementary school teacher Elza herself is said to be particularly interested in concerns of language acquisition and communication during those days.¹¹

In the 1950ies Elza became director of a public elementary school in the outskirts of Recife, where she asked to and supported the teacher Miriam Didier to develop methods of alphabetisation with art or artworks. She refers to her own primary school teacher as a main source for the idea of teaching arts as at least a complementary subject for motivation of the students at primary school.

In 1964 she follows Paulo in exile to Chile and later to Europe joining him on his journeys. In the essay *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation* Paulo emphasises her importance for mental support during these difficult phase.¹² Finally in 1980 she returns with him to Brazil. Here the story ends, as my sources stop in 1964 with the description of her life.

CONCLUSIO

For the working group in Zurich on re-engaging Freire with female language learners, concerning theory, it seems to be important to gain more information why Elza Freire didn't become visible as crucial figure for Paulo's theory appearing mainly as "his wife". It seems to be equally relevant to get to know more on Noemia Varela among others and the qualities of their relation to Paulo. It also seems to be significant to keep contact with SPE as one important player in the genealogy of "foreign schools" with a political activist position in the Zurich context for reflecting on one's own methodologies. It therefore seems to be important to also collect information from Geneva on contacts of Paulo Freire liaised at Zurich and possibly try to interview them.

¹⁰ Nima I. Spigolon (2016): *Pedagogia da Convivência: Elza Freire - Uma Vida Que Faz Educação*, Sao Paulo: Paco.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Paulo Freire, Antonio Faundez (1989): *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation*, Genf: ÖRK, S. 10-23. Aus dem Englischen übersetzt von Peter Schreiner. S. 23

There is a list of other things which need to be done but they haven't become part of this story yet.

SOURCES

Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv. Archive signature 429: Berufsschule der Emigrierten, Scuola Professionale Emigrati SPE

LITERATURE

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