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The Unthinkable Community. Paul Chan

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The Unthinkable Community

e-flux journal

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Longing  
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Lust  
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Sternberg Press

The Unthinkable Community

New Orleans. The devastation the hurricane left behind and the subsequent negligence of local, state, and federal officials painted a bleak picture of a society abandoned and of people left to fend for themselves. The emergence of The Front and other groups in the city (artistic, political, religious, civil) is a testament to the will of the people to self-organize against the wake of a natural disaster slowly turning into a societal tragedy already precipitated by political inertia, poverty, and racism. What matters here is not how directly these groups confront or try to bring about an end to the wrongs, although this is a vital concern. Rather, it is significant enough that they choose to risk interrupting the seemingly entropic drift of things by organizing themselves against the current.

Like clockwork, epochs turn and return with the tumultuous cycles that produce economic bounty and human misery in equal measure. For the collective, the figure of community holds the potential for saying and doing it all differently. So what ultimately distinguishes community from society is the difference between imagining that reality can be transformed and realizing that it can only be managed. In this sense, politics becomes a form of groundskeeping. To rise above the ground, and stand with the strength of common purpose, gives the communal figure a definitive shape and enables the collective to remake existing politics so that it may serve a future life where substantive relations are the rule rather than the exception. The appearance of a real community expresses what actual society ought to be.

In self-organizing, members strive to create a living model of genuine social difference. This is the utopian aspect of any collective enterprise that is truly collective, rather than merely managerial

of history settled, is not wind against the skin. Within this void emanates the spectral presence of the unfinished, the half-formed, and the unimagined, as a reminder of just how far one is from being complete and wholly self-sufficient. And it is only through social bonds that this essential incompleteness becomes exposed as the secret all singular beings share, and must stubbornly hold onto, in order to remain uniquely and fully present in the world. The sentiment evoked in lines like "you complete me" or "I'm nothing without you," sung in curiously robotic R&B ballads by the likes of Keyshia Cole and R. Kelly, has ontological truth: they express the tremendous burden of one's singularity, of being utterly incomplete. By loving, struggling, or engaging intensely in some other way, one finds the chance to ease the burden by forging a bond deep enough to fill the void of singularity and feel a semblance of inner completeness.

Community, then, is what happens when we complete ourselves. Through purpose, members of the collective come together and merge with the work they have agreed to accomplish as one. And the more the collective realizes what it has set out to do, the more its members internalize the work as a greater living embodiment of themselves. It is this communal fusion that powers the collective. It is also what makes the experience so intense. It is in fact the intensity that makes it fulfilling. From the smallest collaborative project to the grandest nation-state, the concentrated pursuit of a common cause is what draws individuals into being members and members into becoming a more perfect union, of and through themselves.

# The Silent University. Towards a Transversal Pedagogy. Ahmet Ögüt

## THE SILENT UNIVERSITY

Over the last dozen years, Ahmet Ögüt has realized a dream: to create a transversal pedagogy. seriously intentioned, these works have an affection for the surreal: there was the football match where all twenty-two players were named Mehmet Yıldız (the commentary soon like a nonsense poem), or the time that Ögüt "fused" with the artist Cevdet Erkek to become a failed alchemist named Ahmet Cevdet Bey. More recently, though, the jokes have become serious, even angry, with short-term projects replaced by slowly unfolding campaigns.

In 2012, in collaboration with the Delfina Foundation and the learning team at Tate Modern, Ögüt initiated the Silent University, an education platform run by asylum seekers and refugees. In the three years before it was launched, the Silent University has developed into more of a nomadic organization, often hosted by art institutions, with Ögüt taking most of a backseat role. Since then, his interests have remained with questions around education, and in 2014 he launched "Day after Debt," a debt-relief program for students. We met in New York on a sweltering early summer afternoon. This was a few days before presidential elections in Ögüt's native Turkey, and a moment of high tension in the city.

That's an important point. A need for "affirmative subversion" as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak proposed. It's about making education, the Serbian and Albanian languages became polarized. During the war in the 1990s, all of the Albanian teachers left and started their own school, an underground version, but they still called themselves the University of Pristina. Soon afterward, this informal version of the university became recognized by American and Western European universities, more internationally recognized, than the original Serbian-language institution. Today, both still exist. That's an example of how the unauthorized can become recognized.

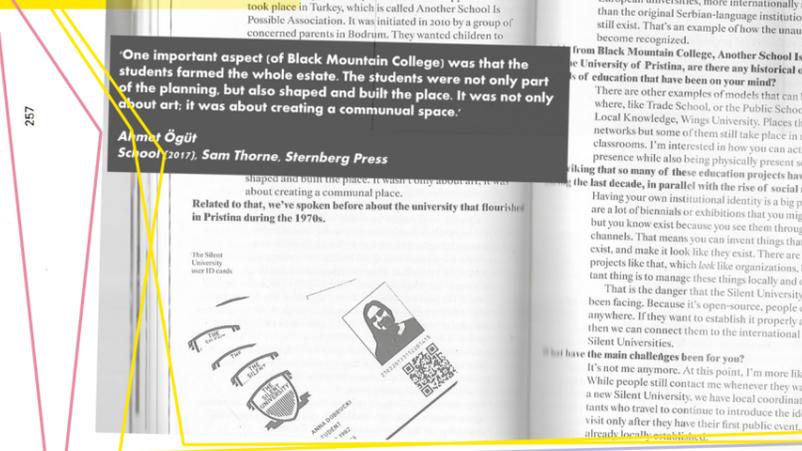
from Black Mountain College, Another School Is Possible, a University of Pristina, are there any historical or possible models of education that have been on your mind?

There are other examples of models that can be copied anywhere, like Trade School, or the Public School, University of Local Knowledge, Wings University. Places that use online networks but some of them still take place in real spaces or presence while also being physically present somewhere. Having your own institutional identity is a big part of it. There are a lot of biennials or exhibitions that you might never visit but you know exist because you see them through social-media channels. That means you can invent things that don't actually exist, and make it look like they exist. There are a lot of art projects like that, which look like organizations, but the important thing is to manage these things locally and on the ground.

That is the danger that the Silent University has also been facing. Because it's open-source, people can start it anywhere. If they want to establish it properly and locally, then we can connect them to the international network of Silent Universities.

What have the main challenges been for you?

It's not me anymore. At this point, I'm more like a guest. While people still contact me whenever they want to establish a new Silent University, we have local coordinators, consultants who travel to continue to introduce the idea. I usually visit only after they have their first public event, when it's already locally established.



"There is no space for asylum seekers in the existing education system which is typically... monolingual, often oppressive... I thought that there was scope to activate knowledge that would otherwise disappear during the years spent waiting for legal papers, learning a new language, and so on. How can we activate this knowledge without waiting? Without losing time. Time is in fact a type of currency."

Ahmet Ögüt, about The Silent University School (2017), Sam Thorne, Sternberg Press



## THE FRONT

'The Front engages and enriches the New Orleans community by providing accessible exposure to exceptional contemporary art with an emphasis on supporting innovative work by emerging artists through exhibition opportunities, a residency experience, and other career building programs'. www.nolafront.org/info

Currently showing at The Front:  
SRĐAN LONČAR If You Would Like to Place a Call.

"I see my payphones project as one that responds to and continues this legacy. Made out of concrete and installed around the city at approximately 25 different sites, the meaning of this work will emerge slowly through daily encounter. Over time, their status as monument will come to light, and passersby will be lead to a provocative question: what history do these objects memorialize? What legacy is both marked and erased by these mute, if enduring and obstinate objects?" www.nolafront.org/info



SRĐAN LONČAR www.nolafront.org

## The Plant Library, Lauren Brincat. 21 September - 2 October 2019, Rouse Hill. A living sculpture composed of plants grown in northwest Sydney.

'The Plant Library is an exchange of living art, encouraging participation and solidarity among the residents around Tallawong, and offering a moment of relief from the urban landscape. Over 10 days, more than 1000 people visited The Plant Library, many of them sharing stories of plant growing and their lives in exchange for a seedling'. www.mca.com.au/artists-works/c3west/the-plant-library/

"These sculptural greenhouses were home to dozens of species, from edible flora grown by locals to plants that form part of Darug cultural practices. The project honoured the Cumberland Plain and reflected on the area's transformation from the food bowl of Sydney to a residential community, filled with a rich growing culture of its own'. www.mca.com.au/artists-works/c3west/the-plant-library/



www.mca.com.au/artists-works/c3west/the-plant-library/

THE PLANT LIBRARY  
Citrus limon (Rutaceae)  
Meyer lemon

Illustrations by Sydney-based designer Liza Murphy of native plant species found at the Cumberland Plain Woodland and non-native plant species found locally near Rouse Hill.

www.sternberg-press.com/product/the-silent-university-towards-a-transversal-pedagogy/

UnderExposed 'Wall of Reference' References.

***The Unthinkable Community* by Paul Chan can be found online @ :**  
[www.e-flux.com/journal/16/61274/the-unthinkable-community/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/16/61274/the-unthinkable-community/)  
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In: *What's Love (or Care, Intimacy, Warmth, Affection) Got to Do with It.*  
July 2017 Sternberg Press.

the eleventh title in the e-flux journal reader series with Sternberg Press, features contributions by Paul Chan, Keti Chukhrov, Cluster, Antke Engel, Hu Fang, Brian Kuan Wood, Lee Mackinnon, Chus Martínez, Tavi Meraud, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, Elizabeth A. Povinelli and Kim Turcot DiFruscia, Paul B. Preciado, Martha Rosler, Virginia Solomon, Jalal Toufic, Jan Verwoert, and Slavoj Žižek.

Paul Chan's case study *The Front* :  
[www.nolafont.org/info](http://www.nolafont.org/info)

SRĐAN LONČAR *If You Would Like to Place a Call:*  
[www.nolafont.org/info](http://www.nolafont.org/info)

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[www.sternberg-press.com/product/the-silent-university-towards-a-transversal-pedagogy/](http://www.sternberg-press.com/product/the-silent-university-towards-a-transversal-pedagogy/)

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**Lauren Brincat: *The Plant Library.***

[www.mca.com.au/artists-works/c3west/the-plant-library/](http://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/c3west/the-plant-library/)

Lauren Brincat:

[www.laurenbrincat.net/](http://www.laurenbrincat.net/)