

Unlearning Center (with a Declaration of “Honesty” as an appendix)

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When looking into my own quasi-organized digital archives, I encountered a meridian image of a hand that I had saved some years under the research folder called “Unlearning Center.” This strikes my mind as a great metaphor for the unlearning and “Unlearning Center” in the way that we employ it at the Casco Art Institute in Utrecht. What this diagrammatic image shows is how each part of a human hand reflects a different part-organ of the whole body. This vision also implies that an ear or foot is not unlike a hand. Modern science has never acknowledged this sort of knowledge about the human body (or perhaps about any body at all), and has not understood how a micro being or instance can reflect or even influence the macro dimension. The idea of unlearning can start by realizing what kind of institution of knowledge or epistemic regime has shaped our minds and behaviors in such a way that we do not to see this correlation between different parts of a whole system, instead preferring to learn through a primitive matter of accumulation. A part and the whole are not separated, and not necessarily hierarchal in their values, in knowledge that existed either prior to or alongside the colonial-modern-capitalist system. Thus, there is no center, as opposed to a periphery; instead, they are not fixed and are separable. Their positions are determined by mutually reflecting and influencing each other. Not only that, but there is no such dualism, since there is not only a hand but also an ear, a foot, and more. They cannot be separated, just like the body is not separable from the mind. The mind reflects the body, just as the body reflects the mind.

At time of writing, the “Unlearning Center,” is a familiar (yet new) name for the Casco Art Institute in her/his/their/its planning for the coming years. If Casco is a center in the way that this type of art organization – which has emerged as an alternative to museums since around the 1990s – is often called an art center, with center implying: “a place or group of buildings where a spe-

cified activity is concentrated,” then we are planning to consciously de-center our activities and therefore ourselves as an integral part of the “un/learning” movement. The process of decentering goes back to the year 2018 at least, if not earlier. This was around the time that we changed our name to manifest our dedication to “working for the commons,” with the desire to challenge and de/re-institute with and for art, in order to serve the commons. The commons, as we understand them, do not just consist of collective resource management, which can be easily identified with any gated community if it is limited to the so-called “local” or “a small scale” but instead refers to a general system of thinking, of governing, that is associated more with the idea of a whole body in a hand. It would be useful here to share Italian legal scholar and activist Ugo Mattei¹ approach to the commons. As a legal scholar, he positions the notion of the commons in the Western legal tradition or in: “a legality that is founded on the universalizing and exhaustive combination of individualism with the State/private property dichotomy.”² Furthermore, his crucial insight lies in articulating that the fabricated, clear-cut opposition between the state and the private is, in fact, made in an even more fundamental, hierarchal, binary structure; namely: “the rule of a subject (an individual, a company, the government) over an object (a private good, an organization, a territory).” He continues by arguing that the commons are conceived beyond resources as objects:

Commons lie beyond the reductionist opposition of “subject-object,” which produces the commodification of both. Commons, unlike private goods and public goods, are not commodities and cannot be reduced to the language of ownership. They express a qualitative relation. It would be reductive to say that we have a common good: we should rather see to what extent we are the commons, in as much as we are part of an environment, an urban or rural ecosystem. Here, the subject is part of the object. For this reason, commons are inseparably related and link individuals, communities, and the ecosystem itself³.

The more specific object of de-centering, unlearning, and commoning, thus, concerns any form of concentrated power that we (can) make accessible. This

1 Ugo Mattei: “The State, the Market, and some Preliminary Question about the Commons”. Available at: http://ideas.iuctorino.it/RePEc/iuc-rpaper/1-11_Mattei.pdf, accessed 19/12/2022.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

even includes the power and habit of curating, to give an example that suggests itself in this context. I myself had to “unlearn” a lot in the form of losing, of becoming estranged, of even no longer knowing about art and curation very well, meaning that the power of selecting and executing was no longer prioritized. My position as the director has been geared toward giving a place to others in the team and beyond, toward facilitating, while others came on board to more actively engage in management, decision-making, and planning – although the extent to which I have been successful in this form of commoning can be questioned. This kind of exercise and practice has been evolving within the organization in a broader scope to include our collaborators, as well as the places of engagement beyond our own building, so as to create an organization and communities around us. This is undertaken even though it has never been broad enough for a certain type of art funding institution that still thinks that social change or transformation lies in quantity and visibility, or that perhaps does not even think about it at all, because it is (pre)occupied with scoring the numbers and with already established parameters in the old regime to secure its positions in the center. There is no body in their hands, so it may always feel empty; this is understandable.

Returning to Casco’s planning and unlearning, we feel our commitment to attracting policy-makers and students or any learners interested in engaging with unlearning and joining our “decentralizaing” process, whereby we as a center are in a constant process of disappearing. What if things do not need a center? We call it an ecosystem in its true sense (not a career-enhancing network): being part of it involves contributing to its regenerative, healing, and caring processes. After existing for three decades and consciously researching and questioning the commons and the relationship of art thereto for almost a decade, this seems to be the inevitable course to follow. This is how we define “Unlearning Center”:

Unlearning Center is a long-term, non-profit educational system initiated by Casco Art Institute: Working for the commons and joined by many other organizations and individuals. It is a practice and relationality driven “un/learning web” that facilitates the process of unlearning institutions towards commoning society with art as an open method and tools for unlearning⁴.

The argument continues in the following way:

4 From the Casco Art Institute’s working document.

Unlearning Center moves away from the idea of learning as a way of accumulating knowledge and knowledge as a cerebral object in the way that the contemporary CPC (colonial-patriarchal-capitalist) institution of knowledge has been shaped. Instead, Un/learning Center considers knowledge as embodied and hence habit as a mode in which knowledge actually operates. What shapes habit, then, is an institution that defines a set of rules and values which often stay stealth and sticky as a habit. It acts with no clear consciousness and yes, it's hard to get rid of even if you aim to do so!

Living in the age of artificial intelligence's deep learning on the one hand and the market-driven demand of lifelong learning on the other, it's our belief that what we as humanity are short of is not knowledge but the profound question of the objectives of knowledge, namely, what and how we learn, and what we do with knowledge. Its anchor can be found in the notion of the commons as an alternative to the dual system of the public and the private that has been functioning as the major logic of governance and economy in all parts of our lives under the CPC regime.

When the commons are the guiding principle, learning should not be just for a job, disciplinary knowledge, and self-achievement but (also) for finding the self, living and working well together in taking care of the qualitative relationships, and contributing to commoning society. To be more specific, it stays aware of how one's habit of thinking, being and acting is shaped by and questions an institution(s), while engaging to change with it in togetherness. There's no more blind separation between the intended display of knowledge and actual living and doing, merging them in practice in and through the self and communities⁵.

Concerning the methods, the basic principle is as follows:

Unlearning requires critically engaging with an established center, existing institutions and their buildings, neither within or outside of it. In doing so, it takes a complex and rich ecosystem in and around the plural centers, namely, "learning web"(s) as a primary un/learning ground. This means that un/learning is always through and with others, weaving and being woven in the learning web.

5 Ibid.

Unlearning Center, by taking art as an open, creative and collaborative method and tool for un/learning, approaches it as knowledge. Art is as institutionally shaped as knowledge is. Thus, the understanding of art varies and changes depending on the institutional structures. Based on this, art is no longer a permanent, objective object free of any value system. Rather, art is defined by a community and therefore its appearance and definitions move as organically and diversely as communities.⁶

Relating is endless in the act of decentering. In the act of disappearing, the activities and programs in our previous structure are made available as tools, methods, and sites for fieldwork offered not only by Casco, but also by other organizations and participants; in this way, these ideas become recycled, regenerative, and re-organized while being repaired and reinvented. In other words, the Un/learning Center aims to create a sustainable environment and system in which lifelong un/learning can take place alongside social change aimed at commoning society vis-à-vis institutional change (or institutional de/resolution). Instead of becoming an institution or a new institution, it aims to be a living un/learning web that facilitates the relationships within an institution and between institutions, whereby the un/learning web grows with care and is actively maintained. Consequently, as a new commons-oriented politics and economy (as well as art) are to be established as integral parts of this web.

Appendix: A Declaration of “Honesty” (for lack of a better word)

The following was written while I encountered the impossibility of writing, while I strove for a different kind of writing that might come closer to “literature.” In the light of unlearning, I also felt writing, inscription, many forms of institutionalized syntax, and the implied flow of thoughts to be unbearable. At least I can no longer read well-written, critical, theoretical essays, although there are no essays without form and tones (so the scope of literature cannot be too narrow or fixed). I want more, I want to live, perform, act, with no dualistic structure controlling my mind that divides what is reflective and rational from what is not. I would not strive for the perfect or fine either. If we are changing the system of knowledge and learning, must the ways in which it is shared not also be changed? One day I may regret sharing this and the following writing –

6 Ibid.

or scribbles of outcries – yet it does not matter as long as it reaches out to someone who is involved in the same struggle as I am and who feels connected, so that we together can make more space and grant time for unlearning, cherishing the joy of being an ecosystem and sharing the sorrow of their illness and dying. What is written, after all, is the reason to unlearn, what unlearning and commoning is, and where art is, although these things are not written “about.”

A declaration.

An honest declaration on the lost thought and position.

To begin with (again) is to be honest.

(To be specific of this time of writing)

This might be a song.

We, Chun Kyung-ja, Maya West and me, were talking with an ironic tone about why Koreans often use this expression, “honestly...” either in writing or spoken in public. Does this mean that they otherwise do not actually speak honestly most of the time? The late Korean artist Bahc Yiso (, 1957–2004) made an artwork titled *Honesty* (1995) that consists of a recording of the Billy Joel song *Honesty* translated into Korean and sung by the artist himself, which can be heard from a pile of cardboard boxes along with his handwritten lyrics. There you can hear the value of honesty in a form of crudeness that has a certain degree of naïveté – purposely sung poorly, yet sincerely. One can listen to it as a parody, but also as an appeal in a struggle that dispenses with any moral superiority. Thus, it also can be a confession, even a chant that reminds one of one’s own immanent contradiction between honesty and fake, and the salvaging possibility to be honest. This is honestly due to the complex, chaotic status of my mind in the background that disturbs any writing or even any executive ability and so I begin this writing with the idiom “honestly.” Every day, this mind goes over art, art institution, personal and collective agency, vis-à-vis the question of life that demands a constant flow of care and maintenance, and the absurd, tragic, political realities dotted with war and political games between the right and the left in pursuit of sustaining the capitalist system in times of climate breakdown – the notion that sounds like a euphemism despite its grave status and at the same time so inappropriately heavy for the “business-as-usual” of everyday life. Speaking more generally, in times when the structure that ruthlessly and ceaselessly leave behind the minor beings, from the disabled and/or economically deprived communities to all the invisible non-human species becoming extinct. It is only within the expression of honesty that I do not know anything

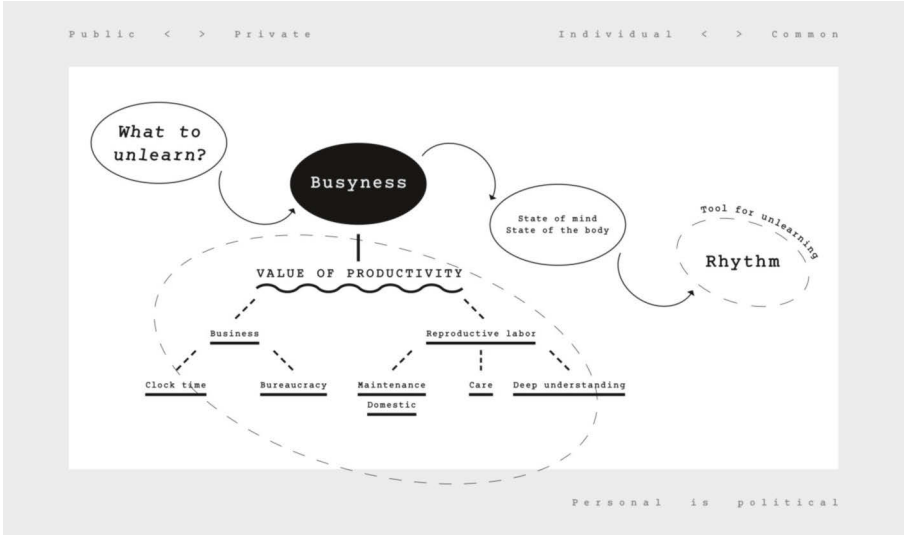
for certain – I am also not sure if there is something culturally specific or Korean about the attention paid to honesty – do I feel that I can write and share some thoughts and ideas here. I even have to face the possibility that this might seem rather megalomaniac or pretentious, as if one could assume responsibility for the whole earth. My tentative argument for this attitude of facing the “whole-earth” is, as the pandemic tried to teach us, that the vulnerability of the human, despite its remarkably destructive power, is tied to the undeniable yet constantly denied fact that its existence is entirely connected within the whole earth system – if not within an astronomically universal one. It should not be about gaining total knowledge and total control over this system, but about asking how we can get attuned to it from our own place and being. It cannot be that one nation indoctrinates another nation, one the leader and one the follower. Nobody and no institution holds such power. As we know – at least there is one thing that we know for sure – it is by no means possible to make a coherent, unanimous arrangement of actions, let alone thoughts, on a planetary scale – or even in a single household. It is always the multitude of resonance and dissonance that needs to be considered, even if there are many intelligent, human and non-human means of reading data, fashion, patterns, and tendencies; moreover, there is the one tiny being of the self that even “I” have no control over within such a universe of the multitude. Being equipped with this level of understanding, in fact, brings peace of mind – “honestly” at least my mind – and a thought that one does not need to remain in indignation or in a sense of loss when facing menacing problems such as the climate breakdown or the maddening lack of political agency and vision for another kind of humanity that is different from the cruel, dishonest, and inequality-perpetuating capitalism that dominates the world. See, “I” am one of the ephemeral, passing instances even in a planetary landscape of pouring newly uploaded or reproduced posts, messages, and media reports into the highly personalized and privatized digital domain, into the invisible ground of the ocean and the earth laid with fiber optic cables, and into the heated server farms being watched only by Google Earth. This does not mean that “I” am “nothing.” “I” am instead attuned to and move in tandem with all of the others, yet I also move in such waves of interconnected bodies and minds not as “I.” Thus, this involves only sensing and listening to that movement, the rhythms, and, if possible, even touching them. No definition is needed. I do not need to be honest, as the honesty has no deep bottom of substance. Yet “I” can try to be honest so that “I” can move again in sensing, listening to, and touching this giant, astronomically big interconnected system. I am a vessel, I am an instrument that is empty,

but which resounds, wherein the universe is an orchestra, an ensemble, or a jazz group.

Speaking of urgency might just be a rhetoric for positioning a dominant power to oneself or no one, making oneself important or disempowering the others, whereas many others who do not speak of urgency are already in place and in different fields and engage with a multitude of urgencies. In fact, any conversation may well begin with this affirmative ground and then proceed by concretely and palpably addressing the how, not the what, in the mode of positive contagion. To reiterate, so that I can find back to the pathways of my *détournement* into honesty, the affirmation comes with the recognition of the universe's interconnected system of resonance and dissonances in the self that is empty, moving, sounding, and changing within.

Bahe Yiso presented *Honesty* in his first solo show in Korea after he returned from USA in 1995. This work was exhibited next to a small boat made of concrete. The symbol of movement, which bridges one side with the other, is now fixed and immobile. I wonder what this song of honesty is doing by the boat. Can the song, in a form of cultural translation from one language to another as well as from the professional performance to the amateurish, be read as a tender yet care-full and "honest" attempt to make that which has become immobile move again?





Figures

- 1) Guideline to Multichannel Casco, 2009. (Notation sketch, Merce Cunningham). Design: Julia Born and Laurenz Brunner.
- 2) Casco growth as self-transformative process, 2018. Concept by Binna Choi. Design by Ika Putranto.
- 3) unlearning busyness, 2015. Concept by the Casco team and Annette Krauss. Design by Ester Bartels.

