

**Anniina Ala-Ruona** is a Helsinki based artist and art educator working in the interface of performance, visual art and pedagogy with an emphasis on feminism, queer theory, ecological questions as well as feminist pedagogies. Currently they operate mostly with various participatory practices in forms of performative installations, workshops, free school and various types of open events. They usually work in collaboration with other artists and makers. Durability, processuality and collectivity are some of the leading characteristics of their working. They are interested in the artistic practices' potentiality to generate new forms of collectivity and space for silenced, unheard or non-normative, queer narratives, experiences and future visions.

**Hanna Ohtonen** is a freelance curator and writer working in Helsinki, Finland. Together with Selina Väliheikki they form a feminist curatorial duo called *nymyt* who's aim is to formulate a curatorial practice that echoes intersectional feminist politics: acknowledging and dismantling hierarchical, competitive, exploitative and exclusive structures of the art field and finding methods of work that stem from empathy, solidarity, care and criticality.

**On giving voice,  
On choosing silence**

**Conversation with  
Anniina Ala-Ruona  
and Hanna Ohtonen**

**María Villa**  
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**María Villa** Thank you for being here with me. It is kind of a magical setting to be protected from the cold to a certain extent. I wanted to talk a little bit with the two of you about what it means to give voice or give space to others, to create an opportunity for a conversation, or for words to come out and to be in a shared space.

Many things come out of that for me. One of them is my interest in silence, actually. And what it means to remain silent or to listen. That can come from many different places; it can mean different things for me in a different situation, and for others. So I wonder, when we want to open that space with others, why are we doing that? Why are we breaking the silence? And what do we expect will happen when we do that? Why is that needed, and how do we do that? Silence can be many things, but in this basic setting, silence for me, is also a way to remain in the unsaid, the unspoken. Silence is also a way to be present; but there's a different sense of presence when we start that conversation with others. So, I was wondering about the ways in which you have approached that process of giving voice?

**Anniina Ala-Ruona** Do you feel like starting?

**Hanna Ohtonen** I can start. Hmm [...] Maybe a voice can't be given, but you can be open to the other's voice somehow. And maybe you can give an invitation for another person or another being to come and speak with you, or converse, somehow. But, I think, personally, I think that sort of breaking of silence comes from a need or wish to understand the other, and learn from one another, or maybe learn together. Like you said, being in silence together is also a way of sharing, but then why do we break it? Maybe we break it to share in a different kind of way, which is to hear and to listen that which can't be heard in silence.

**AA** And there are different silences, or different reasons to remain or be silent. There are silences that are caused by trauma. And then there are silences that are perhaps more decisive or consciously chosen. I mean, like situations where I remain silent, for example, as a decision not to take part, or to deviate from a discussion or from a joke, or from something that is trying to be made as common... from something that I do not do not want to be part of, or do not want to orientate towards. Then, remaining silent is a conscious choice or can be a conscious choice of showing that I do not take part.

**MV** To dissent.

**AA** Yeah, yeah, exactly. And I think that maybe some of the silences that are caused by trauma are silences that should be broken. But there is also a variety in silences caused by trauma, and some of them also need to be kept silent if those bodies want to. ... I guess when thinking about creating or giving space, for example, thinking of separatist spaces, or safer spaces, or feminist spaces, anti-racist spaces, one of the biggest reasons for those to exist, or for me to try to create those, is healing, collective and personal. Because those can be spaces which maybe are not delightfully chosen, or consciously delightfully chosen, but spaces wherein silence can be broken.

But then I was also thinking of listening to silences that are in our society, which I feel is very much placed on discussion and ability to articulate oneself; the ability to elaborate, to be articulate and to explain yourself, and also to be able to take part in academic discussions and so forth.

And maybe not all traumas need to be put in words... Like, not at all; for example, meaning a trauma that might block your ability to speak over all. Like you don't even want or cannot take part in conversations whatsoever. So, then,

how to start to maybe create places ...or futures that do not recreate the blockage of speaking? How can these kind of futures be found, or created, or supported where those blockages might not need to exist?

**MV** Or even the idea of finding other words, like you have said before: maybe ways to touch this unsaid, this unsettling, without destroying it, without just translating it. In the sense of how poetry can be embracing contradictions or complexities without doing violent translations of the struggle. In my practice, I guess I haven't been so close to personal processes of others that same way, but I've been close to the act of writing or trying to articulate a story or an idea. And when I think of this 'giving voice' as giving space, I think of being there with someone to help them articulate or find the right metaphors, or ways to approach these experiences, or the concepts that they're struggling to talk about. And I find it so beautiful that you can accompany someone in that process.

**HO** Maybe one thing you can give someone is words; a vocabulary to address something, and then also in that process of giving, understand that the other might not want to take what you give. But that sort of offering is an invitation.

**MV** Yeah, like you just open your bag and bring tools to the table, and they can decide which ones are they using.

**AA** Yeah. I was also wondering about what you said, that maybe voice cannot be given as such, for anyone. And then also that it is important to remember in this idea of giving (because there are also different levels of giving) that when giving something, or thinking of giving space, everyone who comes into that space should have full agency, have their own

kind of agency of coming there, instead of deciding not to come there. That I cannot as a hero go anywhere and say who needs to be given space. But that if I create something or create a space, facilitate a space, for example, then the people who come, it's their decision, it's their own full agency of deciding that they want to try in that moment. And in that process the giving is multidirectional. It's not only one person giving something maybe, but it can be seen more from a sharing perspective.

But obviously, when thinking of privileges or resources, I do think that the ones who might have more of those in any given moment (it might change obviously and it does change throughout days and years and months) those with more resources for example can make that suggestion or offering of facilitating something, but also see that the giving is not coming from a place of charity, or of thinking that you know who needs what, or who needs to be given what. But I do think that for me, in particular, it comes also from a very personal need of having more spaces to address these kinds of questions, and so forth. So, it is not only thinking that others need something, it comes also from a personal need.

**HO** Yeah. There's a saying that you can't give space, but space needs to be taken. But I think you can invite someone to share a space, and I think that's what you can do, and then in that invitation make clear why you're offering that invitation. Because every invitation holds expectations and hopes, and personal or political wishes for something to happen. So then maybe if those things are voiced out in the invitation it is easier to decide whether you want to take it or not, come and participate in sharing, or that you want to say no.

**MV** You are touching there one important issue: there is always this side or position of power when you are the

one organising a situation for others. The way you speak about it, it's very clear that you don't see those participants as others, in the sense that you come from the same place, that you could be just one of them. So, it is not a top-down invitation, but a bottom-up initiative, so it's very different in that sense. Talking about curating for instance, or the role of the editor, or other positions where you have the means to do things with others, for others, over time this puts you in a place of distance between participants, sometimes, because it creates this role that is very complicated where you can (you still want to do this) put things in motion in an activist way, but because you have found some resources or a position inside an institution that enables you to do things you also have acquired a certain place of power and that changes the dynamic... It might.

HO It does...

MV So, for me it was very interesting the way Nora Sternfeld was talking about this, with curating as organising conflict, or organising the impossible. In the sense that you kind of resign that power, you use it still, but what you try to do is create a field where tension can emerge. You don't give anything really, you don't give voice, you don't give a space for others to occupy, but you set up the conditions for the tensions to emerge, even if those tensions are going to point at your place of power eventually. You take that risk. So you embrace your own vulnerability that way. And that will be the only honest way to do it.

HO Yeah, for sure.

MV And then, how do you do that?! It's always the big question. How do you do that?

HO As a curator or...

MV In any project that you decide to do... anything you want to mobilize. It means that you put a lot of energy, you put your ideas, and then at some point others are coming in. Hopefully they come in early enough that it can be a collective thing.

HO I think that you have to acknowledge that there is power, every time. And that as much as you might try, you can't give it all up because you are the one who invited or facilitated something. Then that power can't be completely relinquished, but you can try to let go of it as much as possible. I mean, you can say 'I have no power' and act in that way, but it's still there. So, I think one important thing is that you acknowledge it, and that you try to make a space where it can be addressed at any point in time where someone can say 'Let's talk about this power that you have.'

MV And then there is also the need to make sure that whatever power you do have becomes a useful thing for others, you know?

AA Yeah. I was thinking also about this giving space as a practice of stepping aside. But in those moments when the one who organised or facilitated or somehow invited something to happen tries to step aside, or does it, and says 'I give up my power,' it very often ends up being a very irresponsible act... And we can have a thought play of you inviting us, and then just saying like 'No. Now you stay there, and you go out' [CHUCKLES] and be like, you know 'I'm just giving space.' I mean these kind of ...that's a ridiculous example of it, but like...

MV But it is a way to not take responsibility.

AA Exactly, and it's a question that I, as an educator, have been addressing a lot when thinking of facilitating learning

situations. When trying to work with ideas of anarchist pedagogy and feminist pedagogy there's never such a situation where no hierarchies would exist at all, or no authorities would exist at all, and then, I guess that I like what you said about trying to create a space, or set up a space, where the power questions can, or could be, addressed whenever... like saying it out loud, speaking about it. But also speaking up to try to make the disclaimers in the beginning, open up your position, talk about it and somehow acknowledge it. Because if the person who facilitates talks about it, for me at least, in my experience when I've been in situations where a facilitator has done it, voicing it out loud, it becomes much easier for me to also be with that... with the problematics of it; or to voice out some problematics about the power relations if something problematic happens, because that person has first shown me that they understand that those things exist.

MV And that they care.

AA Exactly, yeah.

HO And also, then, if you do imagine this situation that you mentioned where a conflict can arise, then you are taking responsibility of that conflict somehow. I mean obviously it's difficult, but I think it can be done (I've seen some people do it)... where you are responsible for the conflict in the way that you tried to facilitate, say, turns or speech, or that there's no argument where you can't hear anyone. And that when you do that you also state: 'I am using my power as a facilitator now to tell you that you should be quiet for a moment and listen to this other person.' So that you keep saying it out loud, so people can then, if they feel like it, try to question it. But because it still remains there, it might remain difficult.

MV But in that sense, you are kind of the guarantor that this space is safe. People are relying on you to mediate in that sense that we all are in a safe space together. We are addressing very delicate things, but we can trust that somebody here cares for this to not be violent, for instance. I mean, I don't think there's any other way of having a true conversation where you address something that is strong and meaningful for others. There's no way to do it without being the guarantor of that trust. So that part does mean you have to care deeply for each of the persons that are in that space with you.

AA I also wanted to add to this stepping aside action, that I think obviously there are moments when that can be an act of responsibility and acts of accountability. I mean, like situations where you are not probably the one who has been facilitating the process. Situations where you can, in a responsible way, step aside or remain silent, even though you could speak up as well. But you know that there are people around to whom you should be maybe listening to at that moment. And of course, as a facilitator you can do that, but not a 100% step aside.

HO I'm going to give this back, thank you. [REFERRING TO THE MATÉ GORDI]

AA I just recently witnessed a situation, exactly how you would describe, this circumstance where the space was... It was thought of as a safe space, shared, in the beginning. I don't know if I believe in "safe space" but I do think "safer" spaces can exist, it is a nuanced difference, but somehow very important for me. But anyway, those ideas were addressed in the beginning, and it was a space for feminist anti-racist thinking and discussions, and then the facilitator there was in both a teacher position and a facilitator position. And I think she handled the situations where there was

a person who took up a lot of space for speaking, and also was contesting maybe a bit problematically some things, and I think she really beautifully proposed methods of speaking or listening to others like ‘Hey let’s have a pause after every comment,’ and also addressing very straightforward like, ‘Maybe you should be silent for a bit,’ or ‘You have been speaking so much and it takes a longer time for others to think their thoughts through, so let’s just kind of...,’ And I was like wow, that can be said! And that person didn’t mind. That person knew that they were speaking a lot and wanting to take some space. And then when someone said that to them they were like ‘Ah yeah, sure.’ I mean not all people take it that way, but it can happen, and it was very inspirational for me... Yeah, I felt definitely safer after that.

AA Did you offer this to me?  
[REFERRING TO THE MATÉ.]

MV Yes. Thanks.

That was the other side of silence that I wanted to talk about. There is also this place of the facilitator to be disarmed and to help orders to also disarm; in the sense of somehow helping when things are brought up, helping a space for things to be taken in. Like to be affected by things; to sit and breathe with them before you move into the next action. When you work with a group that is essential, I think. This paying attention to the group and paying attention to yourself as you go. [...] Finding a voice is also a thing that takes time. And people will embrace your invitation to breathe, so you also have the power of inviting to that, to silence. You don’t necessarily remember it on time... Or I don’t!

HO [CHUCKLES].

AA It is true that forms of discussion have somehow sedimented very clearly. For instance, silences is seen as awkwardness, and it can be a great practice to try to bear with that. For example, for people who are used to taking space with speaking all the time. I think it’s generous and important but somehow like a beautiful invitation (in situations also problematic, or deep, or when traumatic things are discussed), to give space for silence every once in a while, wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

HO It sounds like a lovely idea. I was thinking that I have a tendency as a facilitator to then start filling the space with speech. Like if the silence happens, it’s like ‘Oh my God, oh my God, no one knows what to say. I should say something so that everyone feels somehow better.’ And then, I think, when you said that as a facilitator you can make space being quiet together, this sounded like a really nice way for people in that moment who, for whatever reason are not speaking, to be allowed to be quiet.

MV Yeah... It is interesting, because both of you are Finnish. [LAUGHS] And if there’s something I have learned from coming to Finland is that people here are comfortable with silence in a way that we’re not in South America. There, it’s all about talking talking, talking on top of each other.. It’s lively and beautiful and warm, but it can be very busy; and people are not taking to silence so easily. It’s associated with dark or sad feelings or, you know, with ‘You have an issue. Why do you want to stay silent?’ But here people have many different ways of being silent, and it has been a beautiful discovery for me.

AA Also a form of violence...

HO Can be. True.

AA Because the silence of not paying attention or not directing your word to some people, can be a form of violent silence. And I think maybe here that is also one very prevailing silence, or a form of silence. But I do agree, definitely, that there is also a beautiful ability in many people here who are comfortable with being silent.

MV And it can be a sign of um... Or just a moment of deep respect for each other.

AA Maybe.

MV Of bonding?

HO Hmm... ugggg... I think it’s ending. It’s very good.

MV Well if Ariel ever listens to this conversation he’ll know we have been having maté. Because that’s the... you’re supposed to make that sound every single time. That’s how you tell others that you’re finished. Then they can have some. So it’s polite.

HO [UGGGGG... GIGGLING] That’s good, yeah.

AA I was also thinking of this listening to silence... like as a possible collective act —and not at all knowing what am I might actually be referring to, what could be the form of doing that, but still this idea of listening to the silences that exist in our society, for example. Because silences are often bypassed or not paid attention to, because they are silent, silences are silent, and somehow voice and sound often get the space or take up more space. And then I just started to think of something like that as an artistic endeavour or something, after this invitation from you came. And I started to think of what could be an act, what could be a way to... Like in the last moment, in the demo[nstration]

on the sixth of December [AGAINST FINNISH INDEPENDENCE], I think there was at some point the silence for Jimi Karttunen’s memory, and there is a tradition of having a silent a moment for something. And then maybe those are not happening enough as they could, those moments of silence and refraining from speaking and listening to the silence of a memory, or the silence of something. In schools or some institutions, these silent moments happen often after a big traumatic event of some sort. But then things that are not seen as big but are continuous, and historical, and traumatic paths, or stories that are kind of going on all the time and have been going on all the time, are not given silent moments, or not given moments of collective silence so often.

MV That makes me think, these moments of silence... when I thought of these metaphors to touch the unsaid like, I thought of circumventing something to step in: to go around it. You’re going around it. Like when silence is proposed: by not addressing something you’re putting the entire focus there. By not articulating words, this powerful moment of focus is created around it. It’s your way to step in, to really go in deep, because no words can touch it. ... If you’re not comfortable with silence those moments can be very long. Then if you are... I mean, or it depends where you are in a particular circumstance. The speed of your thought at the moment, or the things are crossing your personal life, but there have been moments of silence that are invited by others where I thought ‘wow it went so fast! I needed more silence. We should do this more.’

HO Yeah.

**MV** And then there's the issue of the 'we', 'us'... Are we inhabiting the same space or how do you become 'we' there, in these spaces of facilitating with others, or creating a space for others?

**AA** I like to think of the 'we' as a fluctuating and constantly changing idea. Meaning that maybe it cannot be easily framed, and in every sentence that is said about the we, the we might change. Meaning that there's like 'We like ice cream,' maybe in this we there might be one who does consider the we as something that person can identify with, but does not like ice cream, so in that sentence, that person is deviating from it, and then another sentence comes 'and we want to smash patriarchy' and then person is like 'Yes I do. Yes I do identify with this we.' [LAUGHS]

**AA** Yes, it is something that I am thinking, because I am inviting now people for the writing workshop and in this invitation I wrote a sentence saying 'We will be asking jala lala lala la,' And then, after that, in the very invitation I tried to open up what I mean by this we, and I maybe try to think of it as saying that the we can at the same time refer individually to everyone who takes part in their workshop, but also to everyone collectively. But that it changes and that it might shift every moment, and that maybe this we can be seen, or perhaps it is an invitation from my side as a thought experiment... That maybe we can be seen as a shared, you know, like a pool, or shared pool of strength, or inspiration, that people can tap into and draw from when they want to. I don't know. And then there are we's that are more solid solid, I guess. Maybe some partnerships can become we's that are very solid and that all the participants in that relationship do feel that that the we can be solid, and can be referred to as we without needing to fluctuate so much.

**HO** Yeah, maybe with time a can be a we even where you c with everything, so that it be a we inside in which there ca disagreements. But that does quickly or instantly.

**MV** I think every true way o together needs to accommod disagreements, needs to be o them. Or it is by creating the were those disagreements ar are addressed that you say o here, we are going to be pres this issue. I agree that it take like you mention. In the thing because I work with fluctuan (I change scenery very quickl inside the exhibitions with pe come to see them), I always t from a place of being present for ten minutes, for an hour, present and say: take what is it. And to be present in that s we are going to give somethi we are going to give somethi going to find something, we'i to discover something togeth invitation to be here. Like wh to somebody 'today I love yo It is today; 'I don't know what with me tomorrow but right a hundred percent here with it's not a commitment in time commitment in presence. An 100%? And what does that me sharing?

**HO** Yeah.

**MV** ... because here is the o right now is the only thing w we are always like just 10% h were never really here. But it find that with others.

**AA** And maybe in that sense can exist momentarily like 10 some given moment, and the need to...

**MV** It keeps on moving. Now, my point is, when doing that you can find so much, when you have moments of true presence with others. And you may lose a lot if you don't risk being there. Of course, you don't always want to. That's not something automatic.

**AA** Yeah. Going back to the idea of why facilitate spaces, give spaces, create spaces. For me, one of the reasons is to look for communities, to look for those communities where I don't need to fit myself into the same patriarchal forms or ways of being that I need to do whenever I am passing through a city, for example, or in my daily life. And then those are the communities and moments of we where I really want to be a 100% present; knowing that I know where I can put my resources and my energies, too. And then, if there are spaces where I cannot, I don't feel like I have the energy to be 100% present, which are maybe elsewhere, that community is not kind of coming together so much, then that's okay.

**HO** Yeah, there's always a choice to commit. And then, with that choice, you also receive. Like you said, a lot can happen. And it's okay if you don't want to make that commitment at some point.

**MV** Yeah, exactly. Was it was one of the manifestos that you had on the table at the ExLab that said: 'Embrace silence as a mode of presence,' I think?

**HO** Yeah, that of Alok Vaid-Menon's, Yeah.

**AA** If I think, from my perspective, or from my position as an educator, this is something that we are taught in critical pedagogy a lot: that active participation is the right way of emancipating people or freeing them. And active participation is very often referred to as speaking, and speaking out for yourself, and voicing things out all the time, and being able to

kind of... I mean, this whole dichotomy between active and passive is very problematic for me. Because silence is seen as a passive act, and speaking out is seen as the goal of being an active citizen.

**MV** ...all this idea of the agency...

**AA** Yeah, and that those who have agency are the ones who can speak, and that is very problematic in my perspective. Also, I think Pablo Freire is talking from a very specific historical context when he is writing about the pedagogy of the oppressed, but I don't think that... That's where the pitfalls happen, or exist, when a Finnish university just takes up Paolo Freire's thoughts of the pedagogy of the oppressed and then uses that as a form of good pedagogy; or refers to the things that he is presenting in his book to try to bring them into this society today. It ends up reproducing the same productivist, white-male centred forms of learning, because of this need to be in a very specific way, active, and in a very specific way taking up agency, or showing your agency. And that doesn't necessarily work in this context today in the same way that it was maybe working there. But this is not addressed, or at least in my studies I don't think these contextual differences or historical differences were addressed. It is very easily recuperated into the same kind of productivist capitalist education system. And silence thus remains as an idea of being passive, or somehow...

**HO** Less valued.

**AA** Yeah, less valued. [...] I think that happens often in academic discourse, at least now in this context of Finland, of Finnish universities and the Finnish art field. A certain kind of language is valued over others, and then voice is given to those who speak that language. And then if you don't have the vocabulary to take part in that conversation you may be

silent for that reason, and then you are not heard. So there are often situations where the ones who have the words and who dare to use them are the ones who then remain in power, because they remain speaking. So there is a hierarchy between voice and silence. And that's something that [...] I often, personally, start feeling distant from really important issues that are addressed, because they are addressed in a very specific language that is not open to everyone, and it might be in a setting that is said to be open and where everyone there is equal, and it is a safe space, but then a certain language is used which then creates that hierarchy.

**MV** Also, the setting up of the conversations matters: if they are not organic to the groups, but are just an artificial set up, where people are expected to participate in the conversation but the language is alien to them, or too formal, or too structured. Or when there has been no work done with the people that are there [...] then how do you? You cannot artificially come up with a true dialogue that way.

**HO** Yes.

**MV** The same as in your reference to Paulo Freire; it is a big issue, I think, because his methodologies for the pedagogy of the oppressed (and Augusto Boal's also, with the Forum Theatre), they were bottom-up strategies that were emerging from this consensual base, or even not consensus, but working collectively into problems... they were not meant as formulas to be implemented top-down. And when you turn them into an institutional technique or methodology, I'm sure a lot of blurry lines that he was exploring disappear and it becomes just a mandate.

**HO** That's a super good point. It can't be used as a technique. It was made in a moment when you put somewhere.

**MV** It's using it like a form of agency.

**HO** Yeah.

**AA** And it becomes also a label of 'I am a critical pedagogue' or 'I am Freire's ideas'... And the one single person then says 'I am a teacher?' This is the base of teachers still (and face it, it doesn't need to be necessary). Yes, these contexts are important. Then misuse happens. It ends up doing exactly the opposite of what it was intended to.

**MV** Yeah, talk about the body of thinking that has been implemented so many times. I find that it has been to be in contact with Freire, but if you get anything from the question that asks, 'It is up to you to answer.' You cannot just copy paste to do the work yourself. It's with others... every time groups are unique, people are different. And then, as you maybe say, this 'speak up' or 'be active' other ways of speaking, how do you speak? Does that mean body speak? Does that mean...

**AA** Exactly. Sara Ahmed has written this: remaining silent as a strategy. That was one of the things I was thinking of... in terms of silence (but I think fucking great). Her blog Feminist Kill Joy called "No." And she's written many different forms of

And this is a language of remaining silent in situations and turning your back, or not laughing, not engaging, as definitely one important way of understanding what silence can be. Silence has some sort of power in it; and it is a form of agency, an act. It's an act.

**HO** It's a bit like the act of leaving a space. You take your body out of a situation and that can actually be like even a... I don't know if a violent but, a radical, statement in a given moment.

**MV** But that's also the moment in which you... You no longer engage with others, you choose not to, and that requires courage, but it's a very difficult line to cross because that means you stop seeing in the other that interlocutor you trust. You say: 'You have disappointed me.' So that is a weapon you don't want to use too often. Because it's a way to break friendship with your interlocutor. So how much can you take, while it is worth to be present in the tension. There's a lot that can happen even if you're not entirely comfortable, but you still are finding something together. And then there is that moment when you step back and say 'I cannot take this...'

**AA** ...anymore.

**MV** And then you ... By removing yourself, it's an act of courage it's an act of some violence in a way, like silence can be a violence that way, removing yourself, but it's kind of like the moment when you give up on somebody.

**HO** For sure, and on the conversation.

**MV** Yes. ...Hopefully we don't have to do that too much.

**AA** This is maybe a slight tangent, but somehow these things totally referred to an experience that I've had many times

now in the university. But the worst time happened just a couple of weeks ago when there was a lecturer talking about (ah... I really don't want to go into it so much, but) problematic things. He was taking up space in a symposium, or was it a conference, where I think he should have not been at all, at all, invited to speak.

I have no idea whose idea it was, and I am very, very shocked that he took the position going there and speaking up, and speaking for a long time, no pauses. And the lecture was so hurtful I was crying, I was... I was in shock throughout the whole two hours. And I wrote a long text during it, that I thought that I will then speak up after the lecture, or when the moment to have questions came. So, he left four minutes for questions, after two hours of very problematic, terribly deeply problematic things what he said, and then... And then I couldn't. I was so hurt that I obviously couldn't, in a lecture room full of people. And I was wondering after that, because I have then needed to deal with it a lot (because it was a traumatic experience to some extent), to think, could these institutions have any forms of like...? How can the body express these kind of things? Are there any ways? I mean, I could have left the place, it could have been a very dramatic statement, but then again, in lecture rooms people leave because they need to take a phone call, or they need to go to the toilet. No one minds, actually. ... So I've been just wondering about different forms of showing some opposition during a lecture, or after it, with your body gesture or something. Because this was definitely not the first time, and probably will not be the last time when something like this happens; and I know that in that lecture room there were many others who experienced it in the same way, and who would maybe... I don't know, do something. But then again, I don't think it is my responsibility to teach any person

about life necessarily. These things I have been wondering about a lot, because those were moments when body gestures are not seen anymore. You're in a lecture room with many people, you become a mass, there is no way you can show your dissent.

Just wanted to say that as a thought, as something that I definitely I don't have any quick answers for, but I've been wondering...

**HO** Yes. And it's difficult because it is a situation wherein dialogue is absent. That has reminded me of a situation where I was in a museum, in a seminar setting, full-house, and an artist was speaking about his exhibition. When the audience was given the chance to ask questions, one person stood up and said, 'I have a question. I find your exhibition super problematic for [these and these political reasons], and I would like for you to comment.' And the artist just said, 'I don't need to comment on that.' And then this person went on and tried to ask it another way, and he made like a super good point. It was not a violent point, he was asking him an honest question and it was very structured. It would have been easy to address it, but the artist decided that he was not going to, and the museum made a decision to take the microphone away from this person. So, silencing them and giving the artist the only possible setting to be heard. So that's super problematic. And again, I was sitting in the audience feeling like I have no power and I should have... I've returned to it thinking that I should have done something, and what would that have been? You become a mass, like you say. But surely there's some agency still there.

**MV** There are also like two moments to it: One thing is to want to stop something that you deeply disagree with when it's happening; so having that reaction would change the turn of events and completely

change the situation, and what it requires is that many people leave at once or something, right? But then there's another moment of agency, I think, and it's what you do with those reflections or ideas or that emotion that arises there... There's a critic and psychoanalyst that I've been reading for the past few years that is very connected (she's Brazilian, French- Brazilian) with Freire's ideas, in a way, but also with contemporary art and performance practices. In her analysis of creative action in contemporary art, she says there is this situation of violence on a subconscious level of colonial thinking, like the structure of the system determines our actions and our thinking in so many ways (could be gender, it could be a socio-economic divide), many ways in which power is present in our lives and is constraining us somehow. She says that in this struggle, this inner struggle, there is an estrangement that you feel, that something is being imposed on you from the outside. There are many things you can do there then; what is specific to artists is that they use that energy that is created, they inhabit this estrangement, this unsettling moment, and they use that energy to create. So they are not just reactive, or they don't just go and be violent against the oppressor or the oppressing ideas, but they turn that into an energy that is capable of sublimating the trauma of that violence. Art is a way in which that energy is transformed into something that deeply addresses that clash or that struggle but that produces in turn. I mean, it is not just reactive, but rather it is active in that way. And she's talking particularly about performance practices and practices with the body.

**HO** What's her name?

**MV** She's called Suely Rolnik. I could share with you some of her texts...

**HO** I would love that, yes.

**MV** This idea is present in several of her texts, but one of them is called The memory of the body contaminates the museum. Because this hurt, and this pain, is present in the body and then it emerges through the aesthetic practices. So that would be the second moment of speaking *uPilvi* when you are in this situation that is so disempowering, and you feel so hurt, you can react immediately, or you can try to understand what's tearing you up so much and work with that later.

**HO** Yes, so not reacting, but acting then afterwards.

**MV** Yes. ... It makes me think... Ten years ago I decided I wanted to quit my job and give away my things and go traveling, backpacking, from Colombia down through South America. I had never done a thing like that on my own, nor really traveled by myself for more than two weeks. And I decided it, and when the time was coming to leave, to start the trip, I got so panicked I started feeling I could not do it. I had it all figured out, how I would do it or, you know, the basic idea. I could return if I felt it was not for me, if I was just pushing myself in the wrong direction. I gave away my cat, my plants... I had no attachments. It was the right moment to do it, I could just leave (I had a farewell party and everything, like I felt I was dying to everybody because I didn't even have a day to come back.) And I did. But what I was doubting, a good friend of mine told me... I confessed to him that I was petrified, that I was feeling so afraid of starting the trip, and he said something that has stuck with me over time. He said: 'Just make a ball with the fear, like it's yarn, just make a ball, you know, and just and let it roll. Make that fear drive you, be the motion that takes you out of here and into the experiences that you have ahead. In Spanish that would be like: Has una bola con el miedo y échala a andar.'

**HO** And does it then unravel? Is that said in the language? Because it is your yarn, and I'm thinking then if it rolls, it unravels.

**MV** Yeah, in a way, yeah.

**AA** So things are also left behind...

**MV** Yes. But fear can be a powerful force instead of something that paralyzes you, you know, that oppresses you. It can be a driving force. Yeah, so I guess after that I've been thinking: 'If I'm afraid of something maybe I shouldn't do it.' Maybe there's something I may learn from it, or something I need to learn there. Of course, there are many ways... And, of course, there are many fears that you can feel, but just going back to this idea of what do you do these situations of feeling trapped. So there is this positive element you can use there if you identify it.

**HO** I also like this idea that, when you're nervous, not like the sort of horrible fear, but the nervous fear of speaking in a public situation or something, then that just means that the situation matters to you.

**MV** That something is at stake.

**HO** So maybe you can think of these two things as positive forces.

**MV** And that it is okay to be afraid. To tell it to yourself... And that it is okay to admit it to others, too.

**HO** That also often makes it less difficult.

**MV** Yeah. For everybody, not just for you.

**HO** True. Then someone can say 'yes, me too.'

**MV** And suddenly like, phhhh..., you breathe.

**AA** Yeah. I also heard speakers are doing that in lecture situations. And very often, it does create the sense that that person really cares for the things that will be said and addressed. And those things are things that are probably even scary to say, or scary to address, because the potential of conflict is always present. But I do think that it's a gift to say it out loud for everyone and for the speakers themselves.

**MV** It tells you a lot about them. If they just present that to you to begin with.

**AA** Yeah.

**MV** I mean how else can you trust somebody? Trust is a little like, ... It's because you don't know the other person, and you have no guarantees that you trust them. That's why you need the trust in any case, because you can't really know anybody. So that moment of trust is created when that openness is presented. And you say okay, I don't need a certificate, I can trust you.

**HO** It's a bit like love, like bell hooks' idea. I am inspired by her saying about how love is not... Love is always a verb. That you say: 'I love you' instead of 'I am actively loving you.' So then trust, also, is not something you gain from somewhere outside, or can take and place, but it's an act. And listening is an act. It's everything.

**AA** Is that book All About Love?

**HO** Yeah.

**AA** I haven't read it.

**MV** I knew about her ideas, but I have never read her directly until this fall. And it's really something amazing because she's... Some people read it, and it reads so simple, it seems harmless, like it has no teeth, you know? Because you expect

from certain feminist perspectives something very critical and aggressive.

And she's just opening, and opening...

**HO** It seems so simple, but how difficult it is to be what she's calling for... phhhh.

It seems super simple, and then when you stop to think about it, it is actually maybe even impossible. But you want to try.

**MV** Yes.

**AA** It sounds that... You're probably referring to the same book?

**HO** Yeah.

**AA** I haven't read it yet, but it sounds, when you describe it, it sounds as if she's already somehow taking this step from only criticising to going already there in the feminist fiction somehow...

**MV** Yeah, she's not just reacting.

**HO** Yeah, yeah.

**MV** She's already on the other side of the fence.

**AA** Yeah, that's true. And it's good that there are other writers who do the ladders [CHUCKLES] ...because we can't just forget where we are, but I think we need also those writers and thinkers and makers who can already open that space somehow.

**MV** And it's the same idea behind every revolution: you fight, and you fight against all the rules, and all the structures, and when you are on the other side and everything has been destroyed, how do you build something that works? Nobody is asking that now because we're so busy destroying what we need to get rid of, but how do you inhabit a different space? How do you do that? It takes a lot of courage and you're going to be criticised heavily for any decision you make. But what she's doing is, she's

trying to really grasp that. I think many people that read her ... In a course we were reading her this fall, people thought she was completely naive. ... And I was like: 'No, no... if you try to do that...'

**AA** [LAUGHS]

**MV** 'It requires the Buddha in you!' It is very tough.

Thank you.

**AA** Thank you so much, both.

**HO** Yeah.

**MV** It's been a great conversation.

**AA** In this space... And the artist, whose name was...?

**MV** Ariel Bustamante. ... It's not so cold.

**HO** No, it's not bad. My body is not telling me that I'm cold. [CHUCKLES]

**AA** It's really good.

**HO** Shall I press here?

**MV** Yeah.

As it happens, when the conversation ends, when space has been opened and people have given their time, their voice — which is not just a voice, but their ideas and experiences, their creative energy and engagement — another conversation often ensues. We were not exempt from this, and in the months that followed our meeting inside the Conversation Room, it seemed that the topic was still unfolding in a complicated arena on which academic practice, and artistic academic practices in particular, are always struggling.

How is artistic work and intellectual work, different forms of participation or generating content, accounted for in our institutions? How are these forms of work assessed, socially valued, or recognized in our present context, and in varied contemporary contexts? And then, how are the authors, the participants, later reimbursed for their contributions?

Whoever opens space for others and brings them in to participate, is both working as facilitator and entering in the logics of cultural dissemination, or reproduction, and can never escape the complex implications of that field. There are bureaucratic implications, monetary ones, but also symbolical; and choices need to be made around the scheme of work that will enable our projects to happen and the compromises that they might require from us and from our participants. Projects happen or are supported always in institutional frames, some way or another. Projects need resources to happen, that is fairly obvious, but they are, or they *become resources themselves*. The desire to participate, to create together, to share ideas does not operate in a well-intended void of “artists sharing their creativity.” People give their time, their work, their experience to make it happen, and what they create, in turn, feeds other people, brings value to the world, and, in some cases, may be sold, profited from, repackaged and repurposed.

This conversation around giving voice, then, did not happen isolated from these complex issues we are all subjected to as cultural workers, educators or cultural managers, but with a clear sense of it, we have experienced it in many ways in our careers, in Finland, and abroad.

When invited to participate in **we need to talk**, learning of the difficulties the publication has faced during the last year just to get enough funds to be printed in Finland, and how the system of grants will not consider artistic fees (for people developing the project, nor for those contributing content to it), we were faced with a difficult choice. We needed to figure out if, and on which terms, our discussion could enter a channel of dissemination that is operating under less than ideal conditions, and in doing so might act to tolerate the normalized and unfair procedure of developing projects using the free labour of artists.

There is a long tradition in independent publications and events in the art field in Europe that operates this way,

and in South America that would be often the norm, even in institutional contexts. The public art field funds are not just scarce, but are also unevenly distributed across genders, disciplines, levels of expertise, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Artists and intellectuals participate in exhibitions and books motivated by the interesting ideas behind the projects, many of them radical, and perhaps impossible, in most institutional frames, or they provide their work for free just to gain a little bit of visibility in the local artistic field. More awareness has been raised in the past decades around giving credits to photographers, for instance, as well as the long list of other participants that were traditionally overlooked. While publication permits are often signed for further use of content, giving credits and authorizing usage is not enough. A full conversation needs to happen in each case to address how a curator, an editor, or a cultural manager finds appropriate ways to return to the participants the value of the work and the content they provide to institutional programming, to an organization’s brand, and so forth.

That being said, perhaps it is useful to remember a term from Spanish, *gestor*, that helps clarify the difficult position a facilitator or cultural manager faces when trying to bring forward opportunities for others to be visible, speak, create, be heard. Far from the business associated term of ‘manager,’ a *gestor(a)*, refers to the leader or whoever takes on the work of developing a cultural initiative, and it is connected rather with the act of conception (from Latin *gestare*, to develop, generate, carry out) but also the act of sustaining and nurturing. Interestingly, the term has no English translation. But *gestores* aren’t directors or high-level decision makers. It is often the case that the *gestor* in an independent project is investing all the personal energy and know-how, putting and keeping people together, finding resources, navigating the uncertainty and the stress any daring project carries with it, etc., all for the sake of an idea, without getting any reimbursement for themselves (or not directly/immediately). That is the case with **we need to talk**. And that is the reason we have decided to enter this project with our conversation despite the fact that the institutional frame making it possible (a grant from Aalto University) stipulates that artistic fees cannot be part of a publication production budget; a strange criterion considering content doesn’t just grow out of nowhere.