

Potential h/Histories

Conversation with Ariella Aïsha Azoulay

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, Salma Mochtari, Virginie Bobin

On November 3, 2022, Virginie Bobin and Salma Mochtari moderated an online conversation with scholar of political theory and photography Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, as part of Qalqalah قلقلة's Research Affiliation with Tanzquartier, Vienna.

In her book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso 2019), Ariella Aïsha Azoulay offers various tactics in order to refuse the narrative order imposed by the dominant, western onto-epistemological framework; and craft “nonimperial grammars”. As she writes: “Unlearning imperialism involves different types of “de-,” such as decompressing and decoding; “re-,” such as reversing and rewinding; and “un-” such as unlearning and undoing. (...) Such rehearsals in nonimperial political thinking and archival practice are not undertaken in preparation for an imminent day of reckoning, but rather as a mode of being with others differently.”

Through this conversation, we wished to consider how *Potential History : Unlearning Imperialism* could offer tactics, gestures and methods to navigate the spaces in which most of us work with, learn from or consume art and theory — namely artistic and academic institutions. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay often reminds her readers that no gesture of unlearning, disengagement or critique can happen without the company of others, without forging conversations with allies and interlocutors located across various times and spaces. As our Research Affiliation was concerned with the elaboration of narratives and their relationship to truth-production, we also wonder how potential history shakes the dominant categories that order our relationships to them.

The conversation developed around five key topics: Introducing potential history; Gestures of Unlearning and Rehearsal; Rewinding; What does art do to theory? and Strike now! Following a Q&A with the audience, an extract from Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's 2022 film *The World Like a Jewel in the Hand* was included at the end of the conversation with permission by the author.



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The video recording of the conversation was kindly edited by Vir Andres Hera.

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, professor of Modern Culture and Media and of Comparative Literature, Brown University, film essayist and curator of archives and exhibitions. Selected books: *La résistance des bijoux. Contre les géographies coloniales* (Rôt-Bò-Krik, 2023); *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019); *Civil Imagination: The Political Ontology of Photography* (Verso, 2012); exhibitions: *Errata* (Tapiès Foundation, 2019, HKW, Berlin, 2020), *Enough! The Natural Violence of New World Order*, (F/Stop photography festival, Leipzig, 2016); and films: *Like a jewel in the hand* (2022) and *Un-documented: Undoing Imperial Plunder* (2019).

Virginie Bobin

Virginie Bobin develops collaborative projects that take the forms of exhibitions, publications, workshops, seminars, texts, translations or ongoing conversations with artists, curators, researchers, performers and art students. She is particularly interested in a feminist approach to translation as a feminist practice of unlearning with others, which is at the core of her PhD-in-practice research at the Akademie der bildenden Künste (Vienna, 2018-2023).

In 2018, she co-founded QALQALAH قَلْقَلَة, an editorial and curatorial platform dedicated to the production, translation and circulation of artistic, theoretical and literary research in French, Arabic and English. Before that, she was Head of Programs at Villa Vassilief, a Paris-based center for art, research and residencies, which she co-created in 2016. Previously, she worked for Bétonsalon – Center for Art and Research (Paris), Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art (Rotterdam), Manifesta Journal (Amsterdam), Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers and Performa (New York). Recent curatorial projects include the exhibition and workshops series "Bestiario de Lengüitas," with artist Mercedes Azpilicueta (CAC Brétigny, 2021; Museion Bolzano, 2020; CentroCentro Madrid, 2019); and "QALQALAH قَلْقَلَة: plus d'une langue," co-curated with Victorine Grataloup (La Kunsthalle Mulhouse, 2021; CRAC Occitanie Sète, 2020). She is a member of Textwork's editorial committee.

Salma Mochtari

Salma Mochtari is a researcher and curator based in Marseille. A member of the curatorial and editorial collective Qalqalah قَلْقَلَة since December 2020, she is since 2022 affiliated with the research cooperative of Clermont Métropole's art school. Her research often stems from the conceptual circulations between the fields of art and contemporary philosophy. Based on the specific cases of archival absence and black studies, she works the present and future genealogies between contemporary, decolonial and queer critical studies, with the heritage of thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida or Judith Butler. In addition to discursive programming, her curatorial practice is based on forms of collective production through workshops, translation or fiction writing.

In the autumn of 2022, she is conducting with Qalqalah قَلْقَلَة a research residency on institutional disappearances jointly with artist Mounira al Solh and curator Line Ajan at the Kunstencentrum Buda (Belgium), and a discursive program with curator Virginie Bobin on the politics of truth-telling at Tanzquartier in Vienna (Austria).

She studied the management of artistic institutions at HEC Paris, and contemporary philosophy at the University of Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne and the University of Paris Nanterre. Between 2020 and 2022, she collaborated with KADIST Paris as discursive curator, where she developed editorial and curatorial programming rooted in the political and societal issues of contemporary artistic practices.

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