The Silent University at Tensta konsthall

From educational platform to community building activities

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the decade-long collaboration between The Silent University and Tensta konsthall, investigating its role as a lasting, solidarity driven, educational, socially engaged art project within an art institution. Utilizing qualitative methods and institutional ethnography, the study examines the relationship between The Silent University within Tensta konsthall. The research uses three guiding questions: 1) How can The Silent University and its integration into Tensta konsthall be interpreted as a socially engaged, transformative, and performative artwork?; 2) How has the implementation of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall evolved since its inception?; 3) What is the current status of The Silent University as a socially engaged project and artwork within the context of Tensta konsthall? The first question is answered by employing Umberto Eco's concept of "open" works and Claire Bishop's analysis of socially engaged art and uses secondary sources as material. The second question is approached through interviews with Fahyma Alnablsi and Emily Fahlén. Drawing from Michel de Certeau's concepts of "tactics" and "strategies," as well as Sara Ahmed's notions of the "stranger" and community building, the second chapter explores the project's evolving dynamics and potential tensions since its establishment. In response to the third question, the discussion synthesizes The Silent University's journey at Tensta konsthall, underscoring its evolution and present condition. Findings highlight The Silent University's classification as an "open" and transformative artwork. It has transitioned from a primarily educational focus to a more socially engaged approach within the framework of Tensta konsthall. The project's sustainability is closely intertwined with Alnablsi’s involvement and engagement, thus posing both a strength and a challenge. In essence, this thesis dissects The Silent University's role within Tensta konsthall, delving into its transformative artistic, educational, and social facets, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the interplay between socially engaged art, institutions, and community dynamics.

Keywords

Tensta konsthall, The Silent University, Tensta Museum, socially engaged art, pedagogic projects, solidarity, knowledge-exchange, community-building, Tensta.
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Introduction

“1. Everybody has the right to educate 2. Immediate acknowledgment of academic backgrounds of asylum seekers and refugees” – these are the first two points in the list of principles and demands created by The Silent University (TSU), “a solidarity-based knowledge exchange platform by displaced people and forced migrants”.¹ The Silent University is led by a group of lecturers, consultants, and research fellows and was initiated in 2012 by artist Ahmet Öğüt. The Silent University’s aim is to grant asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants the chance to put their professional backgrounds from their country of origin into use in the country they presently live in. The Silent University currently has permanent branches, or faculties as they are often called, in Sweden and Germany.²

In spring 2022, I interned at Tensta konsthall, an art institution placed in Northern Stockholm, as part of my education at the Curating Art master’s program at Stockholm University. I had visited the konsthall a few times before my internship and had felt that the place was very much alive in a different way than my experiences with art institutions in my hometown of Copenhagen. Whenever I came, there were always people sitting in the café area, often talking to the staff. During my internship, I learned about Tensta konsthall’s work with the platform The Silent University. I observed and experienced how it operates and got to know more about its background. My interest in this research stems from a curiosity in long-lasting socially engaged artistic practices taking place in art institutions. I wanted to learn more about the relationship between the initiators of The Silent University and the art institution, and how such a project can last in an art institution for a longer period of time. In addition, I was curious about how an international platform like The Silent University adapts to the local environment and space, in this case, the konsthall and the neighborhood of Tensta. I wanted to know more about how the project was run on a daily basis and how it had evolved over time. Something told me that The Silent University at Tensta konsthall had not always been like it is today.

In recent years, more examples of art projects creating their own platforms, based on solidarity and the potential of art, have emerged as responses to current political situations such as migration, environmental issues, privatization and neoliberalist tactics. Several projects formulated by artists or cultural workers have been initiated within the last decade in response to the migration laws and treatment of newcomers in the Global North. These are often socially engaged and work in the scope of art and activism. Some of these projects operate autonomously, whereas others create collaborations, often with art or education institutions. Coming from Denmark, I have followed the project Trampoline House (established in 2010) and its art initiative CAMP which was established in 2013 and opened to the public in 2015. But despite having a large installation at the latest documenta 15 in 2022, the Trampoline House has been struggling to survive as a cultural institution in Denmark for several reasons, including support and funding.

The Silent University was, as mentioned above, established in Tensta konsthall in 2013 and functions as a long-term running project in the art institution. Since the goal of The Silent University is to provide solidarity, knowledge exchange, and acknowledgment of academic backgrounds of asylum seekers and refugees, I would argue that its relevance only rose and became a concrete response to a large influx of immigrants between 2014 and 2017, both in Sweden and abroad. This would grant asylum seekers and refugees a possibility to perform their educational skills while waiting for the result of their immigration status. By being hosted in an art institution, they would also be able to avoid the bureaucratic structures often connected to formal educational systems.

Today, The Silent University Stockholm department is coordinated and run by the receptionist and head of teaching at Tensta konsthall, Fahyma Alnablsi, who is also an ambassador for

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The Silent University internationally, where she attends events and programs. Whereas the Silent University in its original form recruited refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants to take part in an alternative learning platform for knowledge exchange which included lectures, classes, seminars, and more, it has now taken a different role and function at Tensta konsthall. The purpose of this study is to understand and investigate the changes that the project has undergone in relation to its establishment and collaboration with Tensta konsthall in 2013.

The year-round daily programming at Tensta konsthall includes the initiatives the Women’s Café (“Kvinnocafé”), Citizen to Citizen (“Medborgare till Medborgare”), and the Language Café (“Språkcafén”). The Language Café is run by Alnablsi and volunteers, and it is open to people who want to learn or practice their skills in Swedish and/or Arabic. Everyone is welcome, especially people who are, for several reasons, placed outside the educational system. The Language Café is the only activity that is officially mentioned as a part of The Silent University programming on Tensta konsthall’s website.6 Citizen to Citizen is a project where newcomers can receive help with different kinds of bureaucratic problems, such as help with translation, making phone calls to authorities as well as helping with job searching, writing CVs, filling out papers, and creating connections. The Women’s Café takes place two times a week at the konsthall and encourages women to come and work on different types of craft. The important part of the activity lies in the conversations and sharing of experiences.7

Both the Language café and the Women’s café often take excursions around the city of Stockholm, visiting museums and art exhibitions.8

The Silent University presents itself as being critical towards institutions but also chooses to collaborate with them.9 It is a globally engaged project, and I am interested in what the project became when it was placed in the specific Swedish context of Tensta konsthall and in the local neighborhood. Taking these things into account, the relationship between the art institution and The Silent University can seem to both be changing the institution as well as the premises of the project. According to the founders, The Silent University is a solidarity-

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9 Florian Malzacher et al., eds., The Silent University: Towards a Transversal Pedagogy (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 15.
based and knowledge exchange platform, but when seen through its evolution in time it exceeds this vision and can also be perceived as an artwork and even a social platform.\textsuperscript{10} The Silent University can be considered an artwork because it was initiated by the artist Ahmet Öğüt but also because it has been exhibited as one.\textsuperscript{11} If the project had not been initiated by an artist, it may have been regarded more as an activist project. Its establishments and connections to art institutions and people working within the art field, therefore, play a significant role. This gives the project several purposes and leads us to investigate how it balances a duality of belonging to both the art world and the social world, which in turn leads to challenges regarding audiences and participants. For instance, considering the sensitivity of refugees and asylum-seekers when dealing with this type of work, how do exhibitions and visual displays take this into account?\textsuperscript{12} The Silent University investigated as an artwork could show some difficulty since its main purpose lies elsewhere but it could also show potential as being an artwork that is multifaceted and transformative in its form. In this sense, it seems important to look at its specific institutional, social, and artistic contexts and how the project, or artwork, is placed.

### Aims and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to understand the practice of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall as a socially engaged, transformative and performative artwork that works long-term within an institutional context, and how this work affects the institution and the project itself. This is done to contribute to knowledge about how solidarity-based, educational art projects can become permanent initiatives in art institutional contexts. The thesis also aims to gather a comprehensive historical overview of this initiative by uniting material that has not been done before, and as such becomes an important contribution that documents and accentuates a critical and curatorial perspective on The Silent University and its establishment at Tensta konsthall.

**Research questions:**

1) How can The Silent University and its implementation at Tensta konsthall be considered a socially engaged transformative and performative artwork?


\textsuperscript{11} Lind, Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden, 97, 108.

2) How has the practice of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall evolved since its inauguration?

3) What is the current state of The Silent University, as a socially engaged project and artwork placed in the context of Tensta konsthall?

In Chapter 1, the first question is answered by using the theoretical inquiry of Umberto Eco’s “open” work and Claire Bishop’s research on socially engaged art practices to look at secondary sources that are all written, and/or edited by key figures when it comes to the establishment of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall.

In Chapter 2, the second question will be answered by looking into the conducted interviews with staff at Tensta konsthall involved in the implementation and development of the project, notably receptionist and teacher at Tensta konsthall Fahyma Alnablsi and curator Emily Fahlén. To contextualize their responses Michel de Certeau’s theory on strategies and tactics and Sara Ahmed’s notions on the “stranger”, neighborhoods and communities will be used to look into the changes and possible tensions that The Silent University at Tensta konsthall have experienced over time.

The third chapter is a discussion of the findings in chapters one and two and discusses the development of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall since its establishment and looks critically at its current state. It also points out what challenges the project could be facing in the future. This part of the thesis uses the same theoretical framework as used in the previous chapters.

**Method and material**

In order to respond to the research questions, I approach the material through qualitative research using the methodology of institutional ethnography (IE). This allows me to look at the framework of The Silent University and its institutional placement in Tensta konsthall. The method investigates how certain phenomena are linked to institutional framework and values the researcher's observations, experiences, and interactions.13 Institutional ethnography was developed as a methodology in the 1970s by sociologist Dorothy E. Smith.14

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14 Sorce, "Institutional Ethnography for Communication and Media Research", 297.
Ethnographic methodologies take usage of observations as material, such as interviews, field notes, diaries, etc. A more traditional ethnographic approach can lack the knowledge or information about the institutional structures, and critical or feminist ethnography often look directly for and at ideological structures. As the title “institutional ethnography” implies, the method focuses on ethnographic methods and examines social relations and cultural processes when looking at institutions. When describing the necessity of institutional ethnography, Smith points out that social reality is created by governing relations and institutions that control and organize contemporary society. Institutional ethnography does not seek to say something “about” the research participants, but rather seeks to approach them as knowledgeable informants whose experiences says something about the institutional processes when an activity or phenomenon is implemented. By using this method one can find information about an institution’s social relations, economic situation, and power related structures also when looking at a single activity within the institution’s frame.\textsuperscript{15}

While data collection within institutional ethnography has developed over time, earlier it was usually based merely on informal interviews. Today, one can use several data and observations to paint a larger image of the institutions. My material includes primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include both direct human experiences and interactions in the form of interviews. The interviews conducted are with Fahyma Alnablsi and Emily Fahlén. Alnablsi is a receptionist and teacher at Tensta konsthall and has followed and worked with The Silent University project at the institution since its inauguration in 2013. Fahlén is an independent curator, educator and writer, and former project manager of mediation at Tensta konsthall (2011-2017). She was a team member of The Silent University at the konsthall and took a great part in mediation and outreach when establishing the project. The interviews focus on the of the establishment of the project at Tensta konsthall, how the project has evolved, and where it stands today. The interviews provide valuable information on curatorial thoughts on the project as well as personal insights on how it is structured as a part of the programming at the konsthall.

The secondary sources include published material about the The Silent University and Tensta konsthall, such as parts from \textit{Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden} (2021), the pamphlet

\textsuperscript{15} Sorce, "Institutional Ethnography for Communication and Media Research", 296-308.
“The Silent University – Tensta Reader” (2013) and a published conversation from The Silent University: Towards a Transversal Pedagogy (2016).\(^{16}\) The first two sources provide an insight into how the project was first disseminated in connection to the establishment of the project and exhibition Tensta Museum (2013).\(^{17}\) They reveal how the project was described, exhibited, and who was involved. The retrospective book Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden also includes a timeline that provides knowledge on how the project was running between 2012-2019.\(^{18}\) The published conversation “How can we imagine a school culture based on solidarity” is the only part of my materials that do not directly deal with The Silent University in the context of Tensta konsthall, but it provides knowledge on Ahmet Öğüt ideas and aims of the project and the potential he finds in working with art institutions. It also provides insight into the role of the artist which is important for the definition and discussion of the project as being both an exhibitable artwork and a socially engaged art practice. The role of the artist as initiator is crucial to understand when considering how much the project is part of an individual artistic practice or if it is an initiative that is established and hereafter run by its collaborators.\(^{19}\)

By looking at this material through institutional ethnography, I seek to present the institutional processes that mark the co-evolution of both The Silent University and Tensta konsthall. In this research, The Silent University becomes the phenomenon, or activity, and Tensta konsthall the institution. The interviews I conducted used a semi-structured frame which allows me to get elaborated answers and to dig into details when deemed necessary. For the online sources as well as the catalogues and texts produced during and after the inauguration period of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall, institutional ethnography allows me to pinpoint the timely developments in the project. Analyzing and following the development of the activities of The Silent University provides me the ability to investigate how the different social relations, geographical placings, and organizational structures influence the work of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall.

\(^{16}\) Emily Fahlen, The Silent University - Tensta Reader (Stockholm, Sweden: Tensta Konsthall, 2013); Lind, Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden; Malzacher, The Silent University: Towards a Transversal Pedagogy.

\(^{17}\) Throughout the thesis I will refer to the project and exhibition as Tensta Museum unless I am referring to the book with the same name.

\(^{18}\) Lind, Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden, 31-119.

\(^{19}\) Malzacher, The Silent University: Towards a Transversal Pedagogy, 13.
**Delimitations**

This thesis is a single case study on The Silent University at Tensta konsthall. I have chosen to focus on the Swedish context in order to go into detail in the analysis of how the project is structured and functions in Tensta konsthall. This choice is made to be able to focus on the development of the project since its inauguration in 2013. Working with this case has made it possible to focus locally on the interrelations between The Silent University, its initiator, artist Ahmet Öğüt, and Tensta konsthall, including current and former staff. The Silent University has had and still has other branches around Europe, and it would have been interesting to compare these, but to narrow the scope and be able to work with specific situations and relations, I have chosen to focus on the history and current state of the project in Tensta.

The material analyzed in this thesis includes both primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources were chosen to investigate how the project was presented and disseminated to the audience as part of the exhibition *Tensta Museum* as well as to delve into the artist's thoughts on the relationship between his role, The Silent University as an artistic platform, and its collaboration with art institutions. As the previous research shows, much has been written about The Silent University, and the books chosen for the analysis also include published conversations on the *Language Café*’s work as part of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall. Since I am investigating how the project works today, I chose to conduct interviews where I would include questions about how the *Language Café* used to be, and how it is now.

A big part of The Silent University is the lectures presented by its members and lecturers. Throughout the thesis, I mention the lectures, but I do not go into detail with the specific content of these, the study rather focuses on under which circumstances and situations these were conducted. The thesis also does not include the voices or experiences of the people attending The Silent University activities at Tensta konsthall today, since it is more focused on the institutional framing. In the same way, it does not include further details about the consultants, since it is more interested in the formation of the group that made The Silent University at Tensta konsthall, and not the specific people in it.

In this study, I look at Tensta konsthall as an art institution and the importance of this in relation to The Silent University and its activities at Tensta konsthall. With this mentioned,
the thesis does not investigate how the project relates to the exhibition program at the konsthall. This could have provided an interesting insight into how the activities engage with the exhibition program, but due to the limited space and the aims of the research I find it more viable to focus on The Silent University’s presence at the exhibition at Tensta Museum and on what occurs at the Silent University activities today.

Throughout the thesis I refer to The Silent University as a ‘project’, this can be somewhat misleading since a project is often considered something that has a limited timeframe and can in the context of the art world be understood as something that a person, or institution is ‘testing’. This is not the case of The Silent University and I hope that this clarification makes it apparent, that I understand that The Silent University is not a test, nor time-limited but a committed platform that works actively in many places around the world. The Silent University is here to stay, both in Tensta and abroad.

Theory
The theoretical framework includes a combination of older philosophical and sociological theory with the more recent feminist, decolonial theory and perspectives on socially engaged practices. Umberto Eco's notion of The Open Work (1962) which in the analysis will be used together with Claire Bishop's book Artificial Hells (2012) to address the first research question. I will also be using Michel De Certeau’s Practices of Everyday Life (1980) together with Strange Encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality (2000) by Sara Ahmed in the second chapter.

Umberto Eco - The Open Work
In The Open Work (1962), Umberto Eco coins the term “open” work by looking at different art forms and mediums insisting on the multiplicity in art and the importance of the reader/audience experience as being engaged and interactive. The connection between the concept of the “open” work and structuralism was what later framed Eco’s semiotics. “Open work” can therefore be considered a pre-semiotic work. In his chapter on visual art, he

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introduces the concept of “informal” art which has connections to the “open” work but also differs on some points. At first glance, Eco’s theory describes art as “informal” when it comes to painting and sculpture, this analysis is formalistic and deals with the brushstrokes and form of the works described. For him, informality occurs when a work contains what he describes as “movements”. Examples of this could be an Impressionist painting but also a classical Greek sculpture. These artworks can be interpreted in different ways and can hold different perspectives which are up to the viewer. However, this type of analysis is not of great interest to the author. For him, the radical example of an “informal” and “open” work comes with the modernist avant-garde, for instance, with the work of Italian artist and designer Bruno Munari. Eco asks:

What are the historical reasons for — the cultural background of — such a poetics, and what vision of the world does it imply? 2. Are such works legible? If so, what are the conditions of their communicability and what are the guarantees that they will not suddenly lapse into either silence or chaos? In other words, can we define the tension between the mass of information intentionally offered to the reader and the assurance of a minimal amount of comprehensibility, and is there a possible agreement between the intention of the author and the viewer's response? 24

He continues to point out that these questions do not deal with the aesthetic value of an artwork but rather ask how a work relates to the contemporary culture that it is placed within. He finds that art pieces communicate, and what he sees in “open” works is that the reader, as he calls them, can interpret the work from an “open” place. For him, the openness is found in abstract painting and avant-garde where the point is that these works do not tell the audience what to think or interpret when seeing them. When it comes to the artist’s intentions, Eco sees the artist as someone who can use terminologies from other scientific fields and insert and translate them in an artistic medium. In this way, the artist can show new possibilities and potentials for the world as a way to reflect on contemporary society, which will make the audience reflect as well. This reflexive view on visual art offers a potentiality without being directly political. 25

Another interesting point from Eco is what he calls the dialectic between the artwork and openness. For him, a work can be so “open”, that no actual work remains, which then becomes pure “noise”. Here, the work is also derived from readings and interpretations from

the audience and more importantly, makes the art critic frustrated when she cannot “distinguish what is art from what is not”. The Silent University is a project that has a doubled nature, since it can be considered both an art project and a socially engaged project. A formal interpretation of the project would therefore not be sufficient, due to the nature of the project but in the analysis the notion of openness works can help avoid a pure formalistic reading.

What criteria define the “open” work? Eco uses classical music as examples. By using contemporary composers and comparing them to traditional composers such as Verdi, Bach, and Stravinsky, Eco argues that his examples “[…] reject the definitive, concluded message and multiply the formal possibilities of the distribution of their elements”. This means that the work is created in a way where when a performer is handed the musical score, it is “open”, and the performer has to take individual initiative in order to “perform” or, as Eco phrases it, “conclude” the work. This does not mean that all interpretations are completely different. The author has provided a frame, and Eco does not believe that this grants opportunities for infinite interpretations. For a work to be “open”, some order needs to exist, otherwise, it is chaos which has no aesthetic value. In his view, the ‘contemporary’ works of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luciano Berio can be considered “unfinished” and therefore they are “open” in a tangible sense. Moreover, other artworks can be “open”, in terms of how the work is interpreted and understood, by for example the audience or critic. For Eco, different perspectives on a work of art grants its higher aesthetic value. Even though Eco’s theory focuses on classical art forms such as painting, music, writing, and sculpture, his ideas around the “open” work and “informal” arts argue for interesting points, such as art as having subversive features.

In the analysis, I will use Eco’s notions of openness to point out and discuss The Silent University as an “open” artwork in the contemporary context of socially engaged and participatory practices. It can be a challenging exercise to use Eco’s theory on an artwork that is so multifaceted and presented in a different medium than the ones Eco deals with, but the

26 Eco, The Open Work, 101.  
27 Eco, The Open Work, 1.  
28 Contemporary for Eco’s time, meaning the 1960’s. Eco uses Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luciano Berio, Henri Pousseur and Pierre Boulez as contemporary examples. Eco, The Open Work, 3.  
29 Eco, The Open Work, 6.  
30 Eco, The Open Work, 3-4.  
31 Eco, The Open Work, 88, 91, 94.
analysis does point towards The Silent University as not only being an educational, socially engaged project but also an exhibited artwork with clear aesthetic, transformative and collaborative features.

**Claire Bishop – *Artificial Hells***

The chapter “Pedagogic Projects: ‘How do you bring a classroom to life as if it were a work of art?’” in Claire Bishop’s *Artificial Hells* (2012) deals with pedagogic and social art practices.\(^{32}\) Throughout the book, she discusses the role of the artist, participant, and spectator when it comes to participatory art practices. For Bishop, the conflict between art and education is that art, in her words, “art is meant to be seen by others, while education has no image”.\(^{33}\) The tendency to create art projects that are educational experiments can be seen as a tendency to connect art and life; to embed art in society.

From a historical perspective, Bishop points to the strategies of the German artist and professor at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (Düsseldorf Art Academy) Joseph Beuys. In his teaching and in the educational system of the Art Academy, Beuys insisted on his own pedagogical methods. For instance, in 1971, he protested the admission system for the academy and decided to enroll all 142 applicants in the program. This was done with the statement that “everyone is an artist”.\(^{34}\) Or rather, as Bishop points out: “everyone can attend art school”.\(^{35}\) Several projects for the documenta exhibitions throughout the 1970s showed Beuys’ willingness to include democracy, education, and pedagogy in his art. Despite this, Bishop points out that Beuys’ projects were much initiated and put to work by himself, and thereby became performative, as there was no project without him as a central figure.\(^{36}\) Today, one can observe artists that initiate social, educational, or pedagogical projects outside or inside institutions, and then outsource the work to curators, experts, or educators once they have been formulated.\(^{37}\)

Bishop believes that there are differences between educational and pedagogical art, and art projects with activist goals since pedagogical art projects produce complicated questions for


\(^{34}\) Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 243.

\(^{35}\) Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 243.

\(^{36}\) Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 244-245.

\(^{37}\) Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 252.
art historians and critics who are already working within institutional education. In contrast, activist art projects often exist outside of the institution and do not mime an educational system. She uses four examples of longer-lasting artistic practices that are pedagogical and educational in their form. These are Arte De Conducta (2002-2009), an alternative art school that also was conceived as an artwork created and run by Tania Bruguera; Paul Chan’s project Waiting for Godot in New Orleans (2007) a process-oriented work dealing with the impact of Hurricane Katrina and ended up as a theater play; Pawel Althamer’s longest running collaboration with Nowolipie Group, an organization in Warsaw for adults with physical and mental illnesses which Althamer taught ceramics since the early 1990s. Bishop’s last example is Thomas Hirschhorn’s The Bijlmer- Spinoza Festival (2009), an art installation mimicking a book, more specifically Spinoza’s Ethics, that hosted a program of daily lectures and workshops.

Bishop describes and analyses each project. In her examples, she finds the artist withdrawing from their initial role as an artist and taking on many roles, one of them being a teacher and at the same time also a student. In the example of Tania Bruguera's alternative art academy Arte de Conducta, which can be translated into ‘behavioral art’, Bruguera has described that she considers this behavior in a broad sense. She formulates this as “a performative gesture that affects social reality.” Bruguera’s home was the school and functioned as a learning space as well as a library. This intimacy led to an informal relationship between her and the students, whom she would refer to as “guests” or “members” instead of using the traditional student/teacher dichotomy. When describing the role of the artist in connection to pedagogic projects or learning situations, Bishop writes:

[ …] the artist operates from a position of amateur enthusiast rather than informed expert, and delegates the work of lecturing to others. It is as if the artist wants to be a student once more, but does this by setting up their own school from which to learn, combining the student/teacher position.

When looking into Paul Chan’s project in New Orleans, Bishop points out how Chan quickly understood that the residents were tired of people coming just to see what Hurricane Katrina

38 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 245.
39 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 261.
40 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 249.
41 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 249.
42 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 267.
had done to the city instead of helping. With the aim of making the theater play, Chan moved to the city and started teaching at various universities, making connections that would spread the word about the play. Bishop finds this slow process of establishing a project as being partly ethical and partly strategic. She also points out that Chan is an interesting figure as an artist, instead of negating the project as art, which artists often do when creating socially engaged projects, Chan reverses the situation by using strategies from activism and pedagogy to realize an artwork.43

In contrast to Chan, artist Pawel Althamer works more intuitively. His longest-lasting project is a collaboration with Nowolipie Group, an organization for adults with mental or physical disabilities (since the early 1990s). Each week he teaches them a ceramics class. He describes how teaching the class is a learning process for him as well, and that it inspires his artistic practice.44 What is clear about Althamer’s work is that it is difficult to exhibit. Bishop describes his project Einstein Class (2006), where Althamer hired a newly fired science teacher to teach juvenile kids science. The project was made into a documentary film but Bishop, who visited the project while it was ongoing, found the film insufficient in portraying a correct picture of the pure chaos she experienced when observing. Bishop does point out how Althamer's work often stems from his own background or experience, so when working with the juvenile kids, he also felt an affiliation with this marginalized group.45

The artist Thomas Hirschorn’s work is Bishop’s last example. His installation and event series The Bijlmer-Spinoza Festival took place in the suburb of Bijlmer close to Amsterdam in 2009. Bishop attended the festival one day herself and describes how the most interesting part was seeing the children play and attend the performance workshops, whereas the lectures fell into the background.46 After the lecture, Bishop understands that the meaning of it was not so much what was actually taught in the lecture, but more the point of bringing people from different parts of society together as a shared experience. In this sense, the project was performative, since the actual content did not really matter; what mattered was community building.47

43 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 255.
44 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 255.
45 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 257.
46 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 261.
47 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 263.
Moreover, Bishop finds that the reason for the rising frequency of artistic pedagogic projects is due to the educational systems that have become increasingly capitalistic in their modes to celebrate success and studies that will generate market value, instead of being an experimental platform for learning and even failing: “Today the administrator rather than the professor is the central figure of the university.”48 This also points towards an increasingly more bureaucratic institutional frame.49

Bishop sees differences in the socially engaged artistic projects that run and exist in Western countries compared to other parts of the world. These are often in response to a bureaucratic and capitalist system, but have the danger to become a performative act that mirrors the artist itself due to the lack of necessity in countries that have access to art and education in many ways. This could be the case of Martha Rosler’s *Martha Rosler Library* (2006) which was a library with all Rosler’s books in New York, and according to Bishop functions more as a reading room and storage option for the artist, instead of providing a needed resource.

Projects outside the largest Western capital cities often are created to provide accessibility for something that has not been available for people beforehand. Bruguera’s *Arte De Conducta* could be an example of this, providing longer-lasting opportunities and critical and political perspectives for artists based in Cuba.50

Bishop concludes by addressing the spectator/student role in these types of projects. She describes how all her used examples work on two different levels. One is the actual educational room, where a student or participant is placed. The other level is the work of the artist, who, in these examples, makes sure to document the process so it becomes an artwork that can be observed by art audiences. The goal seems to be a fusion of art and social life, and this occurs in the balance between process and documentation.51

In the chapters I use Bishop’s theory to investigate The Silent University as an artwork with social, pedagogic, and educational features. I investigate the role of the artist and compare The Silent University at Tensta konsthall with Bishop’s examples. This brings me closer to an

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49 Bishop finds the Bologna Process (1999), which standardized all European educational systems, as one of the main reasons for this development. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 268.
assessment of how and if The Silent University, in the context of Tensta konsthall, balances being a project that attends to both the social world and the art world.

**Michel de Certeau – *The Practice of Everyday Life***

When analyzing the interviews to investigate how the work of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall has evolved over its 10 years of activity, I have chosen to work with theorists Michel de Certeau and Sara Ahmed. They both use phenomenology in their respective work to understand and analyze human experiences. Certeau uses phenomenology to delve into the potential of everyday activities and actions, and Ahmed investigates the experiences and memories of migrants.

In Michel de Certeau's book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) he celebrates and highlights the importance of everyday activities.⁵² Instead of considering these as mere repetitive actions with little or no meaning, Certeau points at ‘ordinary’ activities as being transformative and as containing potential. Anonymous, everyday life actions can change the way public, urban space is being used and perceived, which can then affect and change society overall. The, so to speak, ‘ordinary’ citizen in his theory has the potential to impact the society they live in.⁵³ It is important to understand Certeau’s definition of the ‘ordinary’ citizen, or ‘ordinary’ man, since this human would differ a lot from person to person. The ‘ordinary’ citizen is linked to ‘everyone’ and ‘anybody’ and functions as a critique of the view of humans as being passive consumers. The ‘ordinary’ man is a person who is a non-producer, or a non-artist but should not be misunderstood because, for Certeau, the ‘ordinary’ people hold abundance and potential to change the setting they are in.⁵⁴ That does not mean that the ‘ordinary’ person, or non-producer person, does not act in the world they live in; on the other hand, Certeau removes the distinction between production and consumption. When one has consumed a product, a new type of production occurs, and this is a subversive idea. People are not considered passive consumers because they, according to Certeau, transform what they consume. Architecture and space could be considered the product, and the way people use space can transform it.⁵⁵

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⁵⁵ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 55.
Certeau sets up a distinction between institutional practices and the practices of everyday life. This distinction is closely related to the understanding of tactics and strategies.\textsuperscript{56} Both of these terms and actions define the life of a city or place, often operating simultaneously. A strategy refers to an action that is calculated and often stems from a corporation or business. A strategy also often has a set timeline and, one could say that the result is often more physical or easy to define. In contrast, the tactic is an act performed by the ‘ordinary’ citizen which results in something less visible. His theory builds on changes in society as happening in two different ways, one is the “topo-tactic”, which is defined as the unnoticed actions performed by the ‘ordinary’ citizens, in contrast, the “topo-strategy” are the activities performed and introduced by the institutions. Topo refers to the site-specific understanding of the terms since Certeau often uses the term in relation to how humans engage with space and architecture. He writes:

But what distinguishes them at the same time concerns the type of operations and the role of spaces: strategies are able to produce, tabulate and impose these spaces, when those operations take place, whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces.\textsuperscript{57}

“Operation” and “space”, therefore, play a significant role when strategies and tactics are being performed, but the tactics are also dependent on the strategies as these are necessary for production. By using the example of a person watching TV, Certeau’s interest lies in what the person watching makes of the images: “the thousands of people who buy a health magazine, the customers in the supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the consumers of newspaper stories and legends – what do they make of what they ‘absorb,’ receive, and pay for? What do they do with it?”\textsuperscript{58} For Certeau, the interest lies in what humans do with the things they consume.

This is contrasted to the view on humans in much Marxist and anti-capitalist theory such as Guy Debord’s book \textit{The Society of the Spectacle} (1967).\textsuperscript{59} In this work, the person is considered a passive observer of a TV show. Certeau does not consider humans as passive observers but puts value into everyday actions, and places people with a great deal of agency in their lives.\textsuperscript{60} The difference also lies in the view of cultural production, in Debord’s theory,

\textsuperscript{56} Certeau, \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life}, xix
\textsuperscript{57} Certeau, \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life}, 29-30.
\textsuperscript{58} Certeau, \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life}, 31.
\textsuperscript{60} Debord, \textit{The Society of the Spectacle}, 14.
one finds an underlying distinction between ‘high’ art and ‘low’ art, and he points out that as cultural production becomes commodified it loses its potential. This distinction does not exist for Certeau, whose concern is not so much with the culture produced but more so with how humans interact with this culture and how this can change society and its surroundings, the “topo-tactics”.

However, Certeau’s theory does leave some questions unanswered. Newer cultural theories point towards the consequences of colonialism and capitalism as creating wrongful images of the “other” and highlight the importance of acknowledging power structures and positions when analyzing cultural phenomena. Certeau’s work does not take such considerations into account, and for this reason, I have decided to include Sara Ahmed in this theory section in addition to the relations of the “stranger”, the guest and the host, further investigated in the previous research section, and in my analysis.

**Sara Ahmed – *Strange Encounters***

The important work *Strange Encounters: embodied others in post-coloniality* (2000) by Sara Ahmed uses post-colonialism and feminism and works phenomenologically. The work tackles the problematic categorization of the human when discussing what is “alien”, which leads to a description of the situation around whom she refers to as the “stranger”. *Strange Encounters* (2000) points towards asymmetrical power relations and criticizes Western fetishization of the “stranger” as being static ‘objects’ without agency. She considers the social construct of the “stranger” as a mere effect of how questions around the inclusion and exclusion of certain people have played a significant role throughout Western history. Ahmed’s theory also centers around the concept of “stranger fetishism,” where the “stranger”, or other, is both feared and desired by those in the dominant culture. The book examines how the “stranger’s” body becomes a site of projection for anxieties, fantasies, and desires of the dominant group. This objectification and fetishization of the “other” contribute to the perpetuation of power dynamics and hierarchies.

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63 Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*.
I have chosen to use the chapters “Encountering the stranger”\textsuperscript{66} and “Home and away – Narratives of migration and estrangement”\textsuperscript{67} as they focus on interaction, communities, neighborhoods, and migration when looking at the “stranger” or “other”. In these chapters, Ahmed focuses on defining who the “stranger” is and how discourses around so-called “stranger” danger’ have produced the “stranger” figure. She describes how the “stranger” is often perceived as someone who threatens a person's property and place. Public life, therefore, plays a large role in the encounter with the “stranger”. Encountering the “stranger” functions on two levels, according to Ahmed, one deals with recognizing the “stranger” as someone who is marked as bodily different, and that is read in ways that will allow a person without these features to distance themselves from the “stranger.” The other level is the one that comes after the recognition, namely the rules and procedures of the social encounter with the “stranger”.\textsuperscript{68} Looking further into the encounters, Ahmed continues to focus on the concept of a neighborhood, something that is relevant when looking at Tensta, and the role of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall in the local community.

For Ahmed, the “stranger” in a neighborhood is defined by those who inhabit the space, the ones “who ‘make it’ their own”.\textsuperscript{69} In neighborhoods, certain bodies are welcomed and accommodated while others are considered “strangers” and therefore unsettling the space. By using this argument, the ‘ideal’ neighborhood therefore is a homogenous neighborhood where people are ‘similar’, or like-minded.\textsuperscript{70} Ahmed continues to describe this type of place as pure and organic which leads her to pointing out how bodies considered outside the normative order who are inhabiting the space may face hostility and rejection. The ideal neighborhood can therefore only exist because some neighborhoods fail. When a neighborhood fails, the discourse around the place changes. Ahmed points out how failed neighborhoods enter a public discourse of crisis, which is a source of fascination and upholds the idea of the ideal neighborhood.\textsuperscript{71} Groups such as The National Neighborhood Watch Association (established in United Kingdom in 1982) uses discourses around the “stranger” in order to perform a social exclusion, Ahmed writes:

\textsuperscript{66} Ahmed, \textit{Strange Encounters}, 22.
\textsuperscript{67} Ahmed, \textit{Strange Encounters}, 77.
\textsuperscript{68} Ahmed, \textit{Strange Encounters}, 24.
\textsuperscript{69} Ahmed, \textit{Strange Encounters}, 25.
\textsuperscript{70} Ahmed, \textit{Strange Encounters}, 25.
The production of the stranger as a figure that has linguistic and bodily integrity conceals how strangers are always already specified or differentiated. Neighbourhood Watch becomes definable as a mechanism for ensuring, not only that certain spaces maintain their (property) value, but that certain lives become valued over other lives.\textsuperscript{72}

This summary of Ahmed's theory on how discourses on neighborhoods are established leads me to continue to her chapter “Home and away – Narratives of migration and estrangement,” which explores migrant experiences and the connection to the term “home”. For the migrant, home is both a necessity and an impossibility for their future. It does not necessarily mean physical anchoring to a certain place. Migrants often become “strangers”, the bodies that defy the norm in the new place they rightfully live in. The stranger-construction is established by the mere fact that a person has left their home.\textsuperscript{73} To Ahmed, this analysis can be true, but she does not find it efficient, the stories of humans who move translocally are more complex and cannot be reduced to the theory of recognizing the “stranger”. Rather, this chapter focuses on what leaving a home does to a person’s perspective on the notion. She writes: “This reconfiguration does not take place through the heroic act of an individual (the “stranger”) but in the forming of communities that create multiple identifications through collective acts of remembering in the absence of a shared knowledge or a familiar terrain.”\textsuperscript{74} The reconfiguration referred to here is specifically one of the migrant’s sentiments of being, belonging, and home. I interpret this quote as moving away from the pure, homogenous neighborhood described in the section above, and a call for community-building where experiences and memories can be shared.

There are obvious distinctions between Ahmed’s definition of a neighborhood and a community. While a neighborhood is primarily a concept centered on the physical closeness of individuals, a community is a more social and relational concept focused on the shared identity, emotional connections, and mutual support among its members, but a community can exist within the neighborhood. Ahmed connects the words place and memory when discussing the migrant experience.

Ahmed draws a line between people she refers to as “global nomads” and migrants. Even though both groups travel translocally, their reasons, the status of privilege, preconditions,
and possibilities for mobility are completely different. She, therefore, criticizes the discourses of comparison of the two. Migration stories are not pre-conditioned or similar, rather, the memories and senses of place and belonging are often very different. Migrants are often “strangers” to each other, and their communities are not established from identification but rather from “gestures of friendship with others who are already recognized as ‘strangers.’”

For the “global nomads,” the community is more automatically established through a recognition of kinship.

For Ahmed, memory and storytelling are important factors in the establishment of communities. It can be of great difficulty to attach memories to a new place that is different from the home. Ahmed calls this estrangement, which is connected to the term “stranger”, but refers to the feeling of being estranged from what was considered home. Collectively sharing memories and stories can help relocate and Ahmed uses an example of a migrant community established in 1994 and consists of female, Asian writers. She problematizes the difficulty or impossibility of using indicators such as ‘Asian’, ‘women’ and ‘writers’ as criteria, since these can pre-suppose shared identity and be excluding or hard to navigate but also points out that a community cannot be established with no purpose. Setting up these rather uncertain categories also brings a possibility for the community to redefine its group identity. This type of community building needs outreach work, and Ahmed points out the importance of having mutual desires of interests when creating a community. In this case, the desire to write then overrules the need of having similar backgrounds.

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75 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 93.
76 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 90-91.
77 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 94.
Previous research
The Silent University and Tensta konsthall has been investigated from different angles in the past decade. In this section, I introduce some important notions and theories that have been used when describing and discussing The Silent University. These are: practices of common, hospitality, and artistic activism in connection to theories around art and politics. Some of these terms will be used in the analysis.

Hospitality and commoning
In the book *Satellite Lifelines: Media, Art, Migration and the Crisis of Hospitality in Divided Cities* (2020), artist, researcher, and educator Isabel Löfgren researches the Stockholm suburb of Fittja through her artistic project, and uses the term “Satellite City” to describe her urban, social and artistic context. “Satellite Cities” are described as smaller, self-contained areas, located near a bigger city, it can be both a poorer and richer area, but historically these functions places that located the working class for people to easier access the city. The area around Botkyrka has a resemblance to Tensta and is also part of the Million Program as well as being highly populated and multicultural. Löfgren defines the Million Program in the following way:

In many of these suburbs, the predominant building type is a neo-brutalist architecture from the late 1960s and early 1970s used for fast, cheap and large-scale construction of affordable housing that built one million new living units between 1964 and 1975, also known as the miljonprogrammet, or 'The Million Program'. Like similar housing programs elsewhere in Europe, in miljonprogram neighborhoods in the peripheries of Stockholm, where the case study takes place, we see the problematic encounter between large-scale government investments to solve the housing crises of the past and the large-scale immigration that allegedly creates a 'population crisis' of the present. What served as a subsidized housing

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79 Löfgren, *Satellite Lifelines*.

solution for the working class one generation ago is now perceived as an eyesore and a burden in the eyes of today's middle class.\textsuperscript{81}

In Stockholm, these “satellite cities” are located at the end of the subway lines, but Löfgren points out that this urban phenomenon is not unique to Sweden.\textsuperscript{82} Löfgren focuses on the philosophy of hospitality in her research.\textsuperscript{83} She argues against the usage of the notion “migration crisis” and rather refers to the situation of many immigrants arriving in a Western receiving country as a “crisis of hospitality”. By creating this shift, Löfgren insists on a shift in responsibility, instead of focusing on the migrant as the one being responsible for their situation, the receiving countries bear the most responsibility. Migration or mobility has to do with a shifting guest-host relationship, rather than the migrant overseeing their destiny.\textsuperscript{84} Löfgren writes:

\begin{quote}
Hospitality implies an ethical relationship: it is how we, as individuals, communities, institutions, and nation-states deal with the Other, the Other as a foundation of our own being – the inverted mirror of who we are. The roles in this equation are the host and the guest. The guest is a temporary entity in the house of the host, which is permanent. Their world views are inverted. Whereas for the host the surroundings are familiar, and any change becomes an alteration of the world-as-is, for the guest everything is unusual.\textsuperscript{85}
\end{quote}

The quote describes how the lives of both the guest and the host are affected by the change it is for the guest’s arrival.\textsuperscript{86} For the guest, nothing is permanent, whereas the host’s static life of pure permanence is challenged. Hospitality contains a potential for the host country to act hospitable. I will be using Löfgren’s term hospitality in parts of the analysis and discussion in order to establish when and how hospitality takes place in the context of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall. I argue that Tensta konsthall and especially receptionist and teacher Fahyma Alnablsi take on the role of host in the activities taking place at the konsthall as part of The Silent University today.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{81} Löfgren, \textit{Satellite Lifelines}, 25.
\item \textsuperscript{82} Löfgren, \textit{Satellite Lifelines}, 141-142.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Löfgren, \textit{Satellite Lifelines}, 5-7.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Löfgren, \textit{Satellite Lifelines}, 14
\item \textsuperscript{85} Löfgren, \textit{Satellite Lifelines}, 42.
\item \textsuperscript{86} The quote implies that the guest is a temporary entity but of course the guest can become a permanent entity if the situation in their home country does not improve. This is the case for many people who arrive in Sweden with refugee status.
\end{itemize}
Sociologist and art historian Pelin Tan, who is also a consultant for The Silent University, has researched and written several texts about the platform, including its activities at Tensta konsthall. Tan uses the notion of “commons” when conducting research on The Silent University. The theory of “commons” or “communing” is defined by Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides as an aim towards good conditions for everyone and can be seen as a response to capitalist society and socio-economic politics.87 “Commons” have a set of resources, and a community can be local or translocal and does not need to be homogenous. It is built on the concept of sharing what is produced within a community. “Commoning” occurs when a community produces something and shares it. Produce, in this context, does not refer to a physical object but can be perceived as dialogues, connections, etc.88

In her article “Unconditional hospitality: art and commons under planetary migration” Tan analyses two artistic practices, one is The Silent University, the other is Al-Madafeh/Living Room initiated by artist Sandi Hilal.89 Tan draws a line between NGO/Activist work regarding refugees and hospitality, and practices and engagements initiated by artists and architects. The latter, Tan argues, offers “new roles for art and curating.”90 She believes that some curatorial and artistic practices produce critical discourses and contra-strategies against governing policies.91 As Löfgren, Tan uses the term hospitality when analyzing the cases, she also argues for a shifting guest-host relationship when it comes to immigration issues. She finds that Sandi Hilal’s work with Al-Madafeh/Living Room gives people with refugee status the possibility of becoming the hosts which changes these roles.92 For her, The Silent University at Tensta konsthall functions as a para-institution, that brings migrants together in an art space. Para-institution means that The Silent University can be seen as a project that exists within the art institution but also can be considered an institution working on its own terms inside the institution.93 Apart from this, The Silent University is described as an initiative creating borderless knowledge production, reflects on education, and knowledge exchange, and addresses terms such as citizenship, war, refugee status, documents,

89 Tan, “Unconditional Hospitality”.
90 Tan, “Unconditional Hospitality”, 1.
institutionalism, and more.\textsuperscript{94} The text states that due to its hybrid existence and collaborations across borders and institutions, it can be hard to pinpoint the exact activities of The Silent University.\textsuperscript{95}

**Mediation practices and institutional critique**

Luísa Santos’ article “New Mediation Practices as a trope for Social Change. The cases of Tate Modern, Tensta konsthall and Clark House Initiative”\textsuperscript{96} focuses on the new mediation practices in art institutions and points towards what new strategies are being used and how social and political art initiatives are implemented in institutional frames. Santos describes how the goal of the mediation at Tensta konsthall is focused on balancing the high-quality art exhibitions with engagement of the local community.\textsuperscript{97} The initiatives involving the local community are not necessarily linked directly to the artistic programming, but the konsthall makes sure to prioritize and nurture the local community.\textsuperscript{98}

Verónica Tello’s study focuses on how The Silent University can be characterized as contemporary institutional critique.\textsuperscript{99} Tello argues that a new wave of institutional critique has been developed and points out that this type of critique is often based on artworks or projects that go beyond the merely aesthetic and deal with themes such as environment, immigration, policy, governance, etc. This tendency springs from the rise of socially engaged art, and some artists even create their own institutions to create new ways of working processual, long-term with social movements.\textsuperscript{100} To Tello, contemporary institutional critique is a critique that “[…] would refuse the West’s (that is, the North’s) hegemony.”\textsuperscript{101} It would work collaboratively and collectively in a growing individualistic and neoliberal society. Whereas Pelin Tan points towards The Silent University being a physical example of “commons”, Tello argues that it is

\textsuperscript{94} Tan, "Unconditional Hospitality", 7.
\textsuperscript{95} For more on "commons" and "communing", see: Anette Baldauf et al., eds., *Spaces of Commoning: Artistic Research and the Utopia of the Everyday*, Publication Series of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, volume 18 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).
\textsuperscript{97} Santos, “New Mediation Practices as a trope for Social Change”, 171
\textsuperscript{98} Santos writes that Tensta konsthall hosted The Silent University in 2015, which is not correct and also uses past-tense as if they are not an active branch anymore. Santos, “New Mediation Practices as a trope for Social Change”, 171.
\textsuperscript{100} Tello, "What Is Contemporary about Institutional Critique?", 636-637.
\textsuperscript{101} Tello, "What Is Contemporary about Institutional Critique?", 641.
an example of a collaborative practice that, as many other will struggle to exist in what she refers to as “neoliberal subjectification”. Tello goes on to discuss the problems that can occur with projects like The Silent University when it comes to division of tasks and labor, arguing that the artist often is referred to as ‘initiator’ since this creates more freedom for the institutions to organize their faculty. In the case of The Silent University, this means that the institution recruits volunteers and manages administrative tasks.

**Art and activism**

Philosopher Chantal Mouffe’s theoretical work often deals with a range of disciplines such as sociology, cultural studies, art, and architecture. When used in the art historical and curatorial field it is often with a focus on the political potential of art and aims for political change through art. Mouffe’s theory on agonism relates to politics as something that one does and can be seen as a call for action. As Paulina Tambakaki formulates it in her text: “In the end, Mouffe’s work sets out a challenge. It challenges the readers to reflect on what it means to work with(in) and against politics.”

Mouffe works closely with the terms antagonism and hegemony. For her, the liberal ideology is an ideology that cultivates individualism and rationality as the hegemonic political power and argues that the world’s (political) problems are too complex to be solved by rationality and are therefore discarded by liberal thinking. Instead of embracing antagonism as part of the social realm, liberalism negates it due to its irrational structure. The political, in Mouffe’s line of thinking, is the field that is linked to the hegemonic institution. This is also where the political and social can differ, as the social is not always linked to hegemonic institutions but of course, they can be and these institutions are led by an order, which for Mouffe will always be political, hegemonic, and therefore based on exclusion. This problem is referred to as the “agonistic” struggle which often takes place in the hegemonic public space and has a potential for action. What becomes clear in this clarification of concepts is that for Mouffe, power and politics are unavoidable and everywhere. When discussing art and the political, she insists that the two are not separate entities but that the political holds something aesthetic and vice versa.

she, therefore, does not distinguish between political and non-political art. Instead she uses the term “critical” art, an art form that challenges the dominating hegemony. She writes:

According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework or the existing hegemony.

Critical art and artistic activism are described as art projects that challenge the existing consensus. Mouffe argues that especially artistic activism that operates in public space should be perceived as counter-hegemonic actions that disrupt the consensual life of corporate capitalism and even challenges the modernist view of the artist as having a privileged position.

Mouffe is part of the published conversation “Art can’t change the world on its own”. She is asked about how she perceives a project like The Silent University, and states that she is positive about the project but finds it hard to see it as an art project. The only thing that makes it an art project, she argues, is that it was initiated by an artist. Another argument for The Silent University being an art project is that it often exists within a smaller art institution, but here Mouffe argues that this is merely due to connections that the artists already have. Florian Malchazer and Pelin Tan, who are also part of the conversation, argue that the art institution differs when it comes to governing policies of, for instance, a school or a political association. Similar to her view on political art, Mouffe finds that activists use artistic tools in their practice and vice-versa, which she refers to as “artivism”. She believes that an “artivistic” project such as The Silent University can work within and at the same time criticize the art institution. The important thing is facilitating the voices of people who are silenced. By discussing examples of The Silent University operations in different cities and circumstances, Mouffe argues that when challenging the current situation, or, working counter-hegemonically, socially engaged art and activism have to work both outside of and within concrete policies and politics in order for change to come.

106 Mouffe, Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically, 4.
107 Mouffe, Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically, 4-5.
108 Mouffe, Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically, 5.
110 Mouffe, Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically, 34-42.


**Thesis structure**

This thesis is structured into three chapters. The chapters are divided according to the research questions and the material investigated. This also results in a linear timeline moving from past to present and into potential futures. The temporal division was chosen in order to give a clearer view of the work of The Silent University at Tensta Konsthall which is provided by the analysis and pinpointing of the activities from then to now.

Chapter 1 looks at secondary sources linked to the implementation of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall. Two of the sources deal with the establishment of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall and are investigated as both a material and non-material participatory artwork by using the theoretical framework provided by Umberto Eco notion of open work and Claire Bishop’s theory of participatory art. The third choice of material focuses on the role of Ahmet Öğüt, who is the artist and initiator of The Silent University and analyzes the discourse of the artist in relation to the role of the art institution when establishing the project. The first chapter shows that The Silent University has both visual, materialistic as well as non-materialistic, social, and educational features, and that the artist aims towards focusing more on the social aspect than the artistic.

The second chapter looks into the interviews conducted with Fahyma Alnablsi, receptionist and teacher at Tensta konsthall and Emily Fahlén who is a curator and former project manager at Tensta konsthall. This part of the study focuses on how the establishment of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall worked concretely and how the project has changed within the ten years of being active. I delve into these aspects by using the theoretical framework provided by Michel de Certeau and Sara Ahmed. This shows that The Silent University can be considered a project that works with the community and has both institutional and structural, as well as citizen-driven, tactical features and that these are often mutually dependent.

The third chapter is a discussion of the findings reached in chapters one and two and investigates how The Silent University branch at Tensta Konsthall functions today. This is done by looking into the monetary aspects of the project, the visibility of the project in the konsthall today as well as a discussion of its development from being an initiative focused on
education to becoming a social platform based on community. This chapter also points out that the project is dependent on the work of Alnablsi which puts it in a fragile state.
Chapter 1: The Silent University Tensta

The first chapter of the thesis looks at material written about The Silent University and its inauguration at Tensta konsthall. This is done to answer the first research question: How can The Silent University and its implementation at the art institution Tensta konsthall be considered a socially engaged transformative and performative artwork? The chosen texts are written by Maria Lind, former director at Tensta konsthall, Emily Fahlén, former project manager at Tensta konsthall and Florian Malchazer who is a curator and has collaborated with The Silent University. The analysis examines the project as an exhibited artwork, the role of the artist, the art institution, and the members of The Silent University and their internal relations and goals during its establishment in 2013. This is done in relation to the theoretical framework.

Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden

Background: Tensta Museum

In 2011, Maria Lind was appointed director of Tensta konsthall. Under her leadership, Tensta konsthall started multiple collaborations, exhibitions, and initiated long-term projects. One of the first projects that Lind initiated in 2012 was called Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden.\(^{111}\) Based on several seminars, the project involved more than 50 artists, architects, researchers, local associations, musicians, and others, and resulted in collaborations, research material, and an exhibition under the same name running between October 2013 and May 2014.\(^{112}\) The project continued in different forms until 2019.\(^{113}\) As a part of the project and the thereto exhibition Tensta Museum, The Silent University was initiated at Tensta konsthall in 2013.

\(^{111}\) Lind, Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden, 6-7.
\(^{112}\) Lind, Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden, 6-7.
\(^{113}\) Maria Lind stopped working as director of Tensta konsthall in 2018. The last activity of Tensta Museum, according to the book took place between October 2018 and January 2019. Lind, Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden, 32.
One could say that *Tensta Museum* took on and played with the notion and traditional perception of a museum as being educational, having certain social codes, representing ‘high’, elitist culture, and being in opposition to things considered popular or of ‘lower class’.\(^{114}\) The goal was not to behave like an actual museum, but for instance, they had branches around the city of Stockholm and they spoke about memory and history which is also a key museum practice. *Tensta Museum* was not about collecting artworks but sought to establish relationships and document the process.\(^{115}\) As part of the project, a ‘classroom’ was built and installed in the institution in 2014 in order to create a space for meetings, seminars, talks, visiting groups and other activities such as the *Language Café*.\(^{116}\)

The collaboration between Tensta konsthall and The Silent University is looked at and disseminated in the publication *Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden* which documents the curatorial work of the project and exhibition *Tensta Museum*, that The Silent University took part in. The publication includes a reversed timeline of the activities that *Tensta Museum* had between 2013-2019.\(^{117}\) Even though the publication disseminates several important aspects of *Tensta Museum* as a whole, I will focus on the parts that deal specifically with the work with The Silent University.

**The art installation as an “open” work**

As part of the timeline in the publication, a floorplan of the first exhibition named *Tensta Museum*, is shown. Work number 19 is placed in the middle of the room and points to Ahmet Öğüt’s name on the register.\(^{118}\) In the description of the art installation it says, “The Silent University (2012-ongoing), library, homepage, publication, lectures and workshops”.\(^{119}\) The quote below is the first part of the installation description. It is important to point out that this text has potentially been written after the exhibition was over, when the publication was made around 2020-2021.

The Silent University is an alternative knowledge exchange platform, initiated by the artist Ahmet Öğüt (Istanbul). The Silent University is directed toward asylum seekers, refugees and migrants

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who, despite their professional backgrounds, cannot practice their professional skills in their present situation. The Silent University adopts the form of an academic program by arranging courses, lecturers and seminars for and by its members and for the general public.  

An image of the installation is found on page 13, indicating what the installation for the exhibition at Tensta konsthall looked like. It consists of four chairs around a round table where a folder with The Silent University logo stands. Some shelves with binders with The Silent University logo printed on them are placed around the table and The Silent University logo is placed in large scale on top of the shelves, which seems to connect them visually.

![Installation view of The Silent University](image)


In connection to Umberto Eco’s theory about “open” and “informal” work, where the “open” work derives from examples from conductors, and “informal” work are referring to visual arts, some things stand out in this presentation. According to Eco, for a visual art piece to be considered “informal”, it has to include movement and propose different types of interpretations. When looking at the art installation in the image, some of the elements that

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122 I unfortunately, did not see the exhibition when it was up in 2013-14 and must therefore rely on the documentation provided.
Eco points to are present even though the physical work is not a traditional art piece like a sculpture or painting which Eco used in his analysis. From Eco’s pre-semiotic perspective, it is relevant to mention that the installation includes signs, such as books, chairs, table, and binders, that refers to other parts of society than the museum or konsthall. One could say that it mimics a library, small classroom, public building, or an office. These signs point towards the importance of education within the project. The round table also indicates dialogue and conversation. In this sense, it does leave the viewer with different possibilities for interpretations but with limitations, which the “informal” work does as well.

Eco uses these criteria when discussing the “informal” qualities of impressionist painting. When speaking of movement, he points out that movement can also occur when a figure is repeated in the image (one could think of Edouard Monet's paintings with water lilies). Likewise, The Silent University logo is, as the image shows, repeated several times in the installation and creates a strong visual statement which also makes it clear that it may also be an artwork. The logos have the color combination of black, white, and yellow, and instead of standing out, the visuals become a part of the total installation, as Eco would describe it, “[…] without involving the structure of the work itself or the nature of the sign”. 123 This means that the logos should not be involving the structure, which I would interpret as being the surrounding furniture.

The word informal also has an interesting position, even without considering Eco’s definition. It refers to an unofficial, friendly manner which also seems to be one of the goals of The Silent University; to work with education outside of the bureaucratic structures that exist within traditional educational institutions. But it is not strictly informal, since it also mimics a university by having lectures, and workshops, which implies a professionalism and formality.

Whereas Eco’s theory of the “informal” work deals with visual artworks, it is closely linked to his general theory about the “open” work, meaning that the “informal” work, is automatically considered an “open” work. To look at The Silent University’s presence at the exhibition Tensta Museum as an “open” work, I find it relevant to include more of the description found in the catalog.

During the exhibitions, a group of five lecturers was connected to the university; their lectures were associated with their specific educational backgrounds. The lectures took place at ABF (Workers’ 123 Eco, The Open Work, 85.
Educational Association) in Stockholm between October 28 and November 1, and were held in Arabic, Kurdish (Sorani), and Uigurish. [...] Seven mentors were part of the network that the Silent University has built up in Stockholm. These mentors work in various ways within core areas of the Silent University; asylum activism, local organizing, migration and anti-racism [...]124

Here it becomes clear that several actors were included in the project, some as lecturers, who then, as is the purpose of The Silent University, gave lectures using their educational backgrounds. It also says that seven mentors became a part of the network. Furthermore, the quote shows that the lectures and workshops were key elements in the project during the exhibition period, which points to the parts of the artwork that are immaterial and processual. Even though Öğüt is credited as the artist, more people were involved in the project’s establishment in Sweden.

Moreover, when Eco formulates his ideas about the “open” work, he uses classical music as a starting point. Eco describes how music created by the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen has several possible ways of being performed, so when a musician is handed the score, this person uses it as a frame but makes their own interpretation. This can also be said about the establishment of The Silent University in Tensta konsthall. Öğüt is the initiating artist, who has formulated the project and made the installation in the exhibition space at Tensta konsthall, but this is done in close collaboration with the staff, and several people are included in order to establish the project. This does, as Eco points out, not mean that the work has infinite interpretations as some elements need to be present in order for it to work. This could be said about The Silent University as well, Öğüt has formulated the guidelines of how the project should work but is also aware that even though he is the artist who formulates the work, particular knowledge about how to make it work in a Swedish system is better handled by the mentors and people working at the konsthall. The Silent University as an artwork can be said to be “concluded”, as Eco would phrase it, by the people responsible for the collaboration at the specific art institution. In this sense, The Silent University can be said to be an “open” and “informal” artwork that changes depending on what city it is in, which institution is embedded in and who the collaborators are.125

125 Eco, The Open Work, 4.
The aesthetic value of a work is, for Eco, established by the audience and critic, who should be able to have various and different perceptions of a piece. In this case, the way The Silent University’s installation at the exhibition was received also depended on the viewers’ engagement in reading and researching the work, for instance by reading the pamphlet “The Silent University – Tensta Reader” placed on the table. But the physical installation can, as mentioned above, function as signs that point to relatable learning situations in institutional settings like schools or universities.

**Audiences and participants**

As Claire Bishop points out in her examples of longer-lasting socially engaged art practices, the artists often documented their work and created exhibitable art pieces from the process. This is also the case with the installation Öğüt presented at Tensta Museum. The binders placed on the shelves held the archive from The Silent University branch at Tate Modern, and the pamphlet “The Silent University - Tensta Reader” was created for its establishment in Tensta konsthall.

The installation was presented in the context of an exhibition in an art institution. But the lectures and workshops are included in the work description, which means that these are also a part of the artwork but not visible in the exhibition space. As the description of the work showed, these lectures did not take place at Tensta konsthall but in Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund (ABF) (Worker’s Educational Association) in another part of the city. Here it is important to point out that ABF is not a cultural institution but an educational institution. Moving the lectures shows how the project worked in a decentralized manner, and that it sought to adapt to and find new audiences as well as making The Silent University work in multiple contexts.

When analyzing pedagogical and educational art initiatives, Bishop finds it important to distinguish between what she addresses as “immediate participants and subsequent audiences.” In order for this type of project to be successful, it must attend to both the art

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126 Fahlén, *The Silent University – Tensta Reader.*
127 Eco, *The Open Work,* 86.
128 At the interview with Emily Fahlén she told me that they received the archive from Tate Modern when they started the collaboration; Fahlén, *The Silent University - Tensta Reader.*
130 Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 274.
audience and the social field, which in this case, includes the members and participants. All of Bishop’s used examples have in different ways worked on both levels. One is the actual educational room where the student, or in this case, the lecturer, is placed. Physically this room would be in ABF’s premises. The other level is the work of the artist, and their ability to document the process in order for it to become an exhibitable art piece. An art piece was exhibited, but by looking at the image and reading the artwork description, it does not seem like documentation but more an installation made to inform about the project and mark the inauguration of the collaboration between The Silent University and Tensta konsthall. In this sense, one could argue that The Silent University’s collaboration exists on two levels, where one is for the participants and taking place at ABF, and the other was for the audience and was included in the exhibition space. But as Bishop points out, the success of a socially engaged art piece being exhibited can be challenging and not always successful.131

Bishop argues that what is important for the general audience is not to necessarily participate in the project, in this case through lectures, but to think about the connection between the art field and the social field when the artwork is experienced. One could imagine that Tensta konsthall wanted to inform about the project and show The Silent University as the knowledge exchange and learning platform it is. But then, what would be missing in this analysis is the audience’s experience of the lectures. Since the collaboration was with an art institution, one could imagine that it was mostly art audiences who were familiar with these lectures, but the description in the catalog also states that: “[…] Listeners who do not speak these languages were not invited to participate – in other words, knowledge, was not be made accessible to all.”132 This note shows that not everyone was invited to participate in the lectures as they were only for people who would actually be able to understand the content.

By doing this, Tensta konsthall and The Silent University make sure to keep them on the level that fits the participants and try to avoid what Bishop refers to as “edu-tainment”.133 This word contraction refers to an educational art project that becomes entertainment, which is a possibility in this matter. If a (presumably white) art audience, that did not know the languages that the lectures were presented in would show up, this could take away the

131 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 272.
133 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 280.
purpose of The Silent University as a knowledge exchange platform and it would rather become a performative.

In her chapter “The Social Turn”, Bishop discusses Maria Lind’s critique and comparison of the work *Bataille Monument* (2002) by Thomas Hirschhorn which was a part of the documenta 11 exhibition with the work of the art collective Oda Projesi. According to Bishop, Lind makes an ethical judgment when critiquing Hirschorn’s work. *Bataille Monument* (2002) was an art project that engaged the local Turkish community in Kassel. Hirschorn paid people to work for him when realizing an interactive artwork dedicated to a philosopher. Lind criticized Hirschorn for having planned the exhibition thoroughly before its installation, which meant that the Turkish community assisting in the realization was reduced to being mere executors of the work instead of co-creators. According to Lind, the problem became that Hirshorn’s work “exhibited” marginalized groups, thereby exoticizing them, making the art project into a form of “social pornography”. This ethical critique is valuable when looking at socially engaged art projects that deal with marginalized people or communities, which The Silent University also does. One way of avoiding exoticization from a predominantly white, Swedish art audience, is by negating access to the lectures.

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135 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 22. Bishop uses this example to highlight the lack of aesthetical judgment when it comes to art critique dealing with socially engaged art practices.
Ahmet Öğüt: the artist as initiator

The book *The Silent University: Towards a Transversal Pedagogy* (2016) provides insight into several aspects of the project, including text and conversations from the different Silent University faculties: London, Hamburg, Ruhr, Amman, Athens, and Sweden. The book is created and written by people close to the project including Ahmet Öğüt. Therefore, it can provide insight into how the initiators and people close to the project wish the project to be perceived and understood internationally. I will look into the published conversation between Florian Malchazer and Öğüt, “How can we imagine a school culture based on solidarity.” The conversation tackles important questions related to the work of The Silent University, especially the role of the artist and the role of the institution which will be the main points of this analysis. Malchazer, who is a curator, writer, and dramaturg, and the former artistic director of the Impulse Theater Festival between 2013-2017, which also worked with The Silent University, leads the conversation.

Between the artist and the art institution

When asked about the project as being top-down structured, Öğüt describes how his role has changed: “First, I was the artist who initiated it, I then became a co-coordinator and co-organizer, now I mostly act as a supervisor, and I hope soon I will become just an ordinary member, a contributor, and a guest”. He describes how the branch in London became inactive because they were lacking commitment from an institution. His wish is that after the establishment in an art institution, the community or an autonomous organization would take over. According to Öğüt, with this process it would move on to becoming a bottom-up organization. At the same time, he does acknowledge that in some places it is best to start in an institution, in order to provide stability and enhance the chances of the project becoming long-term.

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137 The Silent University faculties in Amman, Ruhr, London and Athens are no longer in operation.
139 Malzacher, *The Silent University: Towards a Transversal Pedagogy*, 12.
When discussing the role of the art institution in the project, Malchazer problematizes the role of the art institution, arguing that some institutions only take on a project like The Silent University for symbolic value, and that everything that comes into the art institution often turns into art even if this was not the original purpose of the project. Öğüt responds by highlighting the facilities that an art institution can provide, which he considers as being underestimated in the art world in general. He also mentions that he is aware that The Silent University within an art institutional context can become “a harmless tactical collaboration” and that the collaborations require close communication between The Silent University and the art institutions.143

Moreover, working with the art institution can also help to gain recognition of the project and to avoid the risk of being marginalized when establishing something new. But at the same time, Öğüt stresses the importance of the art institutions being willing to change if they want to work with the project. He stresses how access was difficult when collaborating with Tate Modern, and that bureaucratic structures can slow down the process. The institution has to take responsibility for the project and give the participants direct access and maybe even pay them to give classes.144 Furthermore, when asked about the “principles and demands” of The Silent University, which Malchazer considers strict and, as he describes it “[t]hey almost seem to be written in stone”, Öğüt responds that it is important to make use of the principles and demands, and to focus on the project as providing options of knowledge exchange for refugees and asylum seekers. At the same time, he points out that other issues such as racism, safety, gender inequality and more, should not be ignored in the process.145 The principles, he says, are most important when establishing the project in an institution, so that they can find guidelines, whereas other issues than the ones stated in the principles can be more important in other working conditions, for instance when The Silent University is established directly by talking to the local community.146

Malchazer continues to stress the role of the artist and the institution when he asks about the risk of exploiting refugees and gaining symbolic value as an artist and collaborating art institutions. Öğüt responds by saying that there will always be a risk of exploitation and that they need to be aware of this and in general make sure to try to get rid of institutional

144 I return to the issues around funding and economy in chapter two and in the discussion.
hierarchies. He stresses that decisions should be made collaboratively by everyone in the group so that a sense of shared ownership is developed. This and funding issues are something he feels more concerned about than what the project does to his title as an artist.¹⁴⁷

**Perspectives on the artist as initiator**

When looking at the conversation through Umberto Eco’s theory of the “open” work, I would argue that Öğüt has some of the qualities that Eco highlights in artists. When Eco describes what he considers the “informal” and “open” work, he describes the artist as someone who can translate or interpret phenomena found in other scientific fields and show them in artistic mediums.¹⁴⁸ This process of translation can provide artworks that show new perspectives and possibilities for how to perceive an issue or phenomenon, which can affect the audience and maybe even change their perspective. This is a rather subversive view of the potential of art. In several ways, Öğüt has also investigated other fields when establishing The Silent University, first and foremost the educational system, and from this, he has created an alternative but still reused phenomena from the field, such as the format of lectures and seminars. He has also created a strong visual identity and a list of principles for the project, which can almost be considered a manifesto, a medium with a long artistic tradition behind it.¹⁴⁹ Both of these make sure that the project has an ideological and visual frame. This is something that Eco also stresses, according to him, a work can be too “open” if it does not have a clear frame, and the work becomes pure noise that has infinite opportunities for interpretation, which is negative since it only confuses the audience. The visual identity and the principles can also be used in an exhibition context, and therefore be presented to an audience that can potentially learn more about the restriction towards education for refugees and asylum seekers.¹⁵⁰

For Claire Bishop, therein lies a conflict in pedagogical art projects, since art is to be seen, and education does not have an image but as I pointed out in the previous section, Öğüt has made sure to create a strong visual identity that makes The Silent University exhibitable. When looking at the role of the artist, it is clear in Öğüt’s answers that he considers himself the initiator, but that he does not want the focus of the project to lie on him being an artist, nor have the project only to be considered a part of his artistic practice, but rather as an

¹⁴⁸ Eco, *The Open Work*, 88.
¹⁵⁰ Eco, *The Open Work*, 1-3.
autonomous entity. His dream, as he described, is that a Silent University branch can exist, and he can function as an ordinary member, contributor, or guest. In the examples of pedagogical art projects that Bishop describes in her chapter on “Pedagogic Projects” she also discusses the role of the artist.\textsuperscript{151} In these types of art projects, Bishop describes that the artist often starts out having a large role as the initiator but is actually an amateur enthusiast rather than an expert in the field that they pursue. This could also be said about Öğüt, who might have knowledge regarding refugees and asylum seekers, as well as about different educational systems, but his main profession and training is as an artist. The artist will, according to Bishop, often withdraw their own role and outsource the running of the project, which is also the case with The Silent University in Tensta konsthall. It is very clear in the conversation that Öğüt is more interested in what the project can become as a pedagogic, political project rather than as art. This is in contrast to Bishop’s example of Thomas Hirschorn’s \textit{The Bijnler-Spinoza Festival} (2009), where the art is the central motivation for the work. Hirschorn is, as Bishop describes it, “more interested in viewers than in students”.\textsuperscript{152} By contrast, Öğüt’s interest lies in the lecturers and the students, and what takes place outside the exhibition space, rather than the people who come and see an exhibition that includes The Silent University.

Lastly, Bishop also criticizes pedagogic art projects in the Western world, which she often sees as responses to capitalistic and bureaucratic structures. This is also the case with The Silent University, according to the conversation. These projects have the risk of becoming what she describes as a performative act that only mirrors the artist. This risk also lies in The Silent University, and I would also argue that the project probably has benefitted Öğüt’s artistic career overall.

\textsuperscript{151} Bishop, \textit{Artificial Hells}, 241.
\textsuperscript{152} Bishop, \textit{Artificial Hells}, 265.
The Silent University – Tensta Reader

The publication placed on the table in Ahmet Öğüt’s installation of The Silent University in the exhibition Tensta Museum is “The Silent University – Tensta Reader”, which was made for the exhibition and collaboration in October 2013. It is edited by Emily Fahlén, former project manager at Tensta konsthall. The publication introduces the collaboration between Tensta konsthall and The Silent University and has texts written by Fahlén, Öğüt but also includes contributions by five “consultants of the university” who are Sweden based. The texts written by the consultants deal with different aspects of borders, education, activism, and taking refuge. I will focus on the introductory text by Fahlén.

The Silent University as educational platform in Tensta

Fahlén’s introductory text “WHAT IS THE SILENT UNIVERSITY?” explains, as the title suggests, what The Silent University is and focuses on the title of the work and its initial goals of their branch at Tensta konsthall. Fahlén starts off by explaining how the University “recruits asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants with a professional background [...]”, and continues to explain how professions of refugees and asylum seekers have been muted and that the goal of The Silent University is to have their careers included and reassigned through this platform.

The educational part is described as a platform that takes the form of an academic program with lectures, classes, seminars, and even a library and student cards mentioned. She also describes how it develops in parallel to educational institutions and reconstructs the meaning of the word “university” by occupying it. In this sense, The Silent University borrows the symbolic weight of a university, but as Fahlén explains it, leaves the bureaucratic processes behind. According to Fahlén, the platform also exists outside of monetary systems, meaning that no one is receiving a fee. Instead, time, knowledge, and helpful gestures are considered a currency. In Artificial Hells (2002) Bishop claims that one of the reasons for the rise in academic and educational art practices is the rise in what she describes as academic capitalism, meaning that an increasingly bureaucratic educational system, especially in Europe, entails a rise in art projects that have educational purposes. She also points toward the

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153 Fahlén, The Silent University – Tensta Reader.
154 Fahlén, The Silent University – Tensta Reader, 1.
155 Fahlén, The Silent University – Tensta Reader, 2.
156 Fahlén, The Silent University – Tensta Reader, 4.
potential of the art institution in this matter. Even though she considers both educational institutions and art institutions under threat, due to the lack of artistic autonomy and bureaucratic systems taking over, she sees the art institution as a place that has great potential for rethinking ways of understanding and practicing knowledge exchange.157 Fahlén also points out the importance of The Silent University existing within the art institution, stating that “[i]t is hard to imagine another institutional platform where the same amount of experimenting and stretching of ideas would be allowed to take place”.158 The importance, therefore, lies in the fact that The Silent University is placed in an art institution, but not necessarily that it has the label of an art project. Bishop states that the criteria she puts up about the potential of the art institution within educational projects do not mean that artists have the skills to practice these changes. But what Bishop refers to here are examples where the artist becomes the teacher, which is not the case with The Silent University, where the teachers, or lecturers, are recruited.

The notion of “silence” is also addressed in the text, both to show that the project deals with humans who have been silenced, but Fahlén also points out that silence is used within the project as a form of activism.159 She describes how The Silent University teachers in London “held their public lectures in silence. They withheld their knowledge from their audience; only the members of the university were given access to the material. In this instance, silence was being used as a method of activism.”160 By withholding knowledge from the audience, the lecturers showed how they themselves were silenced by the system that they were navigating. This is also another way of performing activism and proving a point instead of being a victim of exploitation by a white art audience who might not be interested in the actual content of the lecture.

Focusing on the area of Tensta, Fahlén writes that almost 90% of the population of the suburb has immigrant backgrounds, and that it is an area with high unemployment and social problems. According to the text, earlier in 2013, a revolt that included burning cars happened in Tensta. Fahlén sees this as a symptom of the problems occurring in the area but continues to point to the strong local engagement of organizations and political initiatives. Fahlén, by including this last section of the text connects the work of The Silent University at Tensta

157 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 269.
158 Fahlén, The Silent University – Tensta Reader, 3.
159 Fahlén, The Silent University – Tensta Reader. 1.
konsthall with other organizational, or political initiatives taking place in the area. In this sense, she points out the importance of the art institution as having a significant role in engaging with the local community. In Satellite Lifelines: Media, Art, Migration and the Crisis of Hospitality in Divided Cities (2020) Isabel Löfgren uses the term hospitality when describing the relationship between the guest and the host. In the case of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall, I would argue that the guests, in the beginning, are the lecturers, who are asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants, and the host is the art institution. Tensta konsthall has the potential of acting hospitably since they are in familiar surroundings, but it also seems that the wish of The Silent University and Tensta konsthall, according to Fahlén, is that the lecturers eventually become co-creators, or co-hosts of the project. This could potentially repeal the guest-host relationship, which could mean a shift in power and authority.

161 Löfgren, Satellite Lifelines, 42.
162 Fahlén, The Silent University – Tensta Reader, 3.
Chapter 2: Interviews

This part of the study analyses the conducted interviews in order to answer the second research question: How has the practice of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall evolved since its inauguration? I investigate how the institution used to work with The Silent University in the beginning as well as how things are working now. In the analysis, I look into the different strategies used by both The Silent University and Tensta konsthall. I will use the phenomenological theoretical frame provided by Michel de Certeau and Sara Ahmed, focusing on the role of neighborhoods, communities, and tactics and strategies, but I also include Claire Bishop’s examples of pedagogic art projects, in order to look at differences and similarities. My conducted interviews with Emily Fahlén and Fahyma Alnablsi are the main material for this part of the thesis. Fahlén is an independent curator, educator and writer, and former project manager of mediation at Tensta konsthall (2011-2017). She was a team member of The Silent University at the konsthall and took a great part in coordination, mediation, and outreach when it was established. Fahlén provides crucial information on the beginning of the project but also has curatorial thoughts on how the project has evolved over time.

Alnablsi works as receptionist and teacher at Tensta konsthall, and has been a part of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall since its inauguration in 2013. She is now the project coordinator of The Silent University in Sweden. Alnablsi brings a great deal of insight into the different aspects of the work, such as the structure, the engagement, and the development over the years. She also provides knowledge about the overall challenges that face the neighborhood of Tensta today.

**Interview 1: Emily Fahlén: “What is really crucial is building up trust”**

The interview with Emily Fahlén was conducted on the 16th of May 2023 in my home in Stockholm and had a duration of 30 minutes. The interview was conducted in English. My main focus of the interview was to ask questions about the establishment of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall. Since Fahlén was the project coordinator of The Silent
University, I wanted to investigate what strategies she and the konsthall used in order to establish the project. Besides this, I also asked questions about funding, The Silent University as an art project and the curatorial thoughts behind the implementation. The end of the interview focused on how The Silent University is run today at Tensta konsthall.

**Background: Tensta Museum – working with migration history**

When considering the establishment of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall, Fahlén pointed towards the importance of the initiation as being part of the project and exhibition *Tensta Museum*. The former director of Tensta Konsthall, Maria Lind, initiated the project and invited Ahmet Öğüt and The Silent University to take part in it. This was how Fahlén was first introduced to the project and to Öğüt and became the project coordinator. This happened around a year before *Tensta Museum* opened to the public. In the interview, Fahlén described how *Tensta Museum* became a long-term integrated part of how they worked in the konsthall. Even though it ‘only’ had two exhibitions, parts of the project, such as certain collaborations, seminars and other activities stayed with the konsthall for many years after, including The Silent University. When talking about the background of *Tensta Museum*, Fahlén described it as a performative project that worked around the notion of being a museum but instead of building a collection, *Tensta Museum* considered itself in between history preservation and history production. When speaking site specifically about Tensta, she said:

Tensta is a suburb in Northwest of Stockholm which has a very interesting history both architecturally but also migration history. In the beginning (ed. 1970s) there was labor migration especially from mainly former Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey. During the 80s and 90s it was more dominated by refugee groups that came to live in Tensta. So, the migration history is something that is very present in Tensta when speaking of the history of the place. […] The Silent University was connected to this strand of interest that had to do with migration history. What we wanted to do with the project (ed. *Tensta Museum*) was not to stay in Tensta, but rather to see Tensta as a place that is connected to other geographies, struggles and events around the globe.\(^\text{163}\)

This quote shows that the purpose of initiating The Silent University at Tensta konsthall was also to connect the area of Tensta to the rest of the world. This is partly done by including refugees and asylum seekers in a project. By using the framework of The Silent University, which has a purpose of working globally, they also made sure to broaden the narrative, to not only be about migration in Tensta or Sweden.

Moreover, when connecting the work of The Silent University to the project *Tensta Museum*, the quote shows how the project was not only initiated in the konsthall for its immediate purpose; being a knowledge exchange platform for teachers and academics who cannot share their skills due to their residence status. The initiation had a larger purpose: to preserve the migration history of Tensta while at the same time producing a new one. This was made possible through the collaboration with The Silent University.

When I analyzed the retrospective catalog *Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden*, the conversation between Ahmet Öğüt and Florian Malchazer, and the pamphlet “The Silent University – Tensta Reader” (which was included in the exhibition space) in the previous chapter, I pointed out how the discourse and visuality of the project made it stay within the frame of an art project. In relation to this, Fahlén’s point about preserving and producing history also shows how the project was indeed also part of a curatorial choice that could help frame the project and exhibition *Tensta Museum*. The pamphlet as a mediational tool does exactly what Fahlén points to: it describes The Silent University as a global concept, but also includes what activities will take place in the context of Tensta Konsthall and has texts that deal with migration, borders, activism, taking refuge, local organization, and more. This way the project makes sure that it becomes ‘more’ than its activities and lectures. It discusses, preserves, and produces migration history, in Tensta, Sweden, and abroad.

**Establishing The Silent University team in Sweden**

Fahlén described the beginning of working with The Silent University as a learning process for both her and Öğüt. For her, it was a lot about meeting potential members, and collaborators and finding a way to frame the project in the context of Tensta. They eventually started collaborating with ABF – Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund (The Workers Educational Association, Sweden). Fahlén stated that this collaboration was interesting because ABF also stands for a self-organized approach to knowledge and learning. Most of the lectures took place at ABF, in what Fahlén referred to as “traditional lecture halls”, whereas some seminars would still take place in the konsthall.

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166 Fahlén, *Interview*. 
I find the choice of changing between places when implementing the project interesting. Fahlén also pointed out that another reason for doing this was to explore the possibility of reaching different types of audiences. When Bishop writes about ‘Pedagogic Projects’, the conflict often lies in the role of the artist and the role of the project when having to be in the art world. She states that the difficulty lies in the fact that education does not have an “image”, meaning that these projects can be hard to meditate and especially to exhibit. By moving the lectures to ABF, the staff at Tensta konsthall and Öğüt insisted on the importance of embedding The Silent University as a knowledge exchange platform and not focusing on it being within the art world. In contrast to Tania Bruguera, who, when establishing Arte De Conducta, used her own home as a learning space, The Silent University and Tensta konsthall chose to use a facility that is made for this type of purpose. This can be seen as mimicking the actual structures of educational institutions, but one could also argue that this is a way of professionalizing the project and being serious about the premise of the concept of wanting to focus on learning. Having the lecturers give their lectures in a more traditional learning environment also gives a sense of authority and respect that the art institution would maybe fail to provide.

On building the group of people working with The Silent University at Tensta konsthall, Fahlén said:

After a while, a group was formed. It consisted of consultants and lecturers. Most of the consultants came from immigrant backgrounds but had a place in society, some were researchers, and some had other jobs or positions. The lecturers had another situation. Some of them were in an asylum process and some of them were so-called paperless. We had received money from the Swedish Postcode Lottery (ed. Svenska Postkodlotteriet). This meant that we were able to pay all the participants for their work and that was very crucial for the project. It cannot be done otherwise, because the goal of the project is to professionalize or recognize knowledge anew and then you cannot have people working for free.

According to Fahlén, the process of outreach and recruitment took around a year. The quote shoes that Fahlén and Öğüt wanted to create a team around The Silent University at Tensta

167 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 241
169 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 249
170 Fahlén, Interview.
konsthall. The consultants’ role in the project was to give advice but also to provide knowledge on how to fit The Silent University in a Swedish context. Furthermore, they also gave advice to the lecturers.171 When Bishop describes Paul Chan’s work with the project *Waiting for Godot* (2007) in New Orleans, she points out how she considers his way of working as an artist a clear understanding of the art world and art politics. Bishop finds that Chan’s work was a balance between working ethically and strategically. It was ethical since he did not exploit the people in the neighborhood whereof some were in a sensitive position due to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Instead, he moved to New Orleans and used his skills as an artist and started working as an art history teacher in the community as a strategy to build up a network of supporters of his initial vision.172 Similarly, by creating a whole team around The Silent University branch in Stockholm, Fahlén and Öğüt made sure to cover several parts of the establishment. The consultants do not only support the lecturers, they also contribute to the publication made in connection to establishing the project and the exhibition *Tensta Museum*. This way, they make sure to be a part of mediating the project to a larger audience and establish the relevance for this to be happening in Sweden.

**The Silent University in Tensta: a community**
When I first encountered The Silent University at Tensta Konsthall in 2021, it seemed like a project that was concentrated around the neighborhood of Tensta. This showed itself both through the people who came to the activities and the type of activities that exist. My internship at the konsthall in spring 2022 only confirmed my first experience. When I met Fahlén, I realized that the lecturers and consultants in the project were not necessarily people from Tensta, or even had a connection to Tensta. This is also when I learned about the collaboration with ABF, which showed that the project initially was less geographically bound to Tensta than I had first anticipated. Part of Sara Ahmed’s phenomenology deals with the differences between communities and neighborhoods and how these are established. She focuses on how collective acts of remembering and identification are important when establishing a community.

A common misunderstanding, according to Ahmed, is that migrants automatically have a connection or something in common. Instead, she believes that a community is established as

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171 Fahlén, Interview.
172 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 252.
a collective effort. By inviting consultants to take part in the establishment of The Silent University in Sweden, Fahlén and Öğüt made sure to create a community around the project. In this sense, the project becomes more based on a communal effort instead of being controlled by the institution. When speaking of the outreach process, Fahlén highlighted the importance of building up trust since the lecturers were in a sensitive position. She even described how they found most of the lecturers and consultants through friends and colleagues that they had in common. The establishment was very much dependent on connections and Fahlén described that Fahyma Alnablsi played a crucial role in the networking. This was also because she speaks Arabic.

Ahmed’s theory highlights that being a migrant does not automatically mean that one has a kinship with another migrant. Stories, senses of home, and belonging are often different, and therefore are migrants also often “strangers” to each other. The Silent University in Tensta konsthall initially had funding for one year with the purpose of having lectures, workshops, and seminars. Establishing a group of people around this purpose can be considered community building, using Ahmed’s definition. By including voices from outside the institutions and collaborating with ABF, they made sure that The Silent University could also redefine its own identity as a project inside a Swedish context. By choosing consultants that had migration backgrounds, even though they were not necessarily first-generation migrants, a shared experience of estrangement could exist in the group which can open possibilities for collectively sharing stories and memories. The consultants were also, in one way or another, involved in work that dealt with activism, borders, immigration, and more. In this sense, the whole group had shared interests, and or experiences with education possibilities and questions around migration. This urge to create a project collectively is, for Ahmed, how communities are established. It is more important to work with the same purposes, but still, be able to redefine the project within the group, than it is to, for instance, have a group where the members have similar backgrounds.

As Fahlén mentioned, The Silent University in Stockholm had received funding for the first year, which naturally meant that after a year, the lecturers and activities became fewer. In the

173 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 93.
174 Fahlén, Interview.
175 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 94.
176 Fahlén, Interview.
177 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 94.
timeline in *Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden*, it is shown that the last seminar and lecture took place in March 2014. After this, The Silent University activities became the *Language Café* and *Citizen to Citizen*, which were established at the konsthall around the same time as The Silent University.178 During the interview, I asked Fahlén about the structures of these activities and their connection to The Silent University. She initially focused her answer on the work of *Citizen to Citizen*:

*Citizen to Citizen* was Fahyma’s initiative. It was implemented as a way of structuring the work that she was already doing since she was in contact with asylum seekers and paperless people that needed a place for printing a paper, or help filling in a paper or applying for a job, these kinds of things. […] People came because they trusted and knew Fahyma. That is why we decided to structure it by scheduling a few hours a week where she could focus on this particular work. I would say it is sort of a continuation of The Silent University together with the *Language Café* which built a large network.179

The activities were not initiated by The Silent University or Öğüt but rather grew out from the staff’s and especially Alnablsi’s ideas of what was needed in Tensta. Michel de Certeau’s phenomenology works with the concept of “topo-tactics” and “topo-strategies” when analyzing what shapes society. What Fahlén described is that these were activities that Alnablsi was already doing and that implementing them as an activity run as part of the institution’s programming was a way to structure the work. Following Certeau’s theory, the initial work with *Citizen to Citizen* can be seen as a “topo-tactic”. Prior to the official implementation of the project in the institution, it was something that Alnablsi was doing every day not as a planned activity or something that was meant to be structured, but more as an ongoing activity that helped the people in the neighborhood. Her presence in the konsthall also plays a role in this. Working in the reception gives her exposure to visitors and therefore it would automatically be easier for people in the local community to approach her, already knowing that she works there. In this sense, Alnablsi’s work was to some extent already connected to the institution before it became structured and scheduled in the konsthall’s programming as part of The Silent University.

I would argue that *Citizen to Citizen* and the *Language Café* can be considered projects that have mutually dependent relations between being “topo-tactics” and “topo-strategies”. When the activities became a part of the official programming at Tensta Konsthall, they were

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179 Fahlén, *Interview*. 
institutionalized, and one could argue that it moved from being a “topo-tactic” to a “topo-strategy.” But I would argue that the history of the projects as citizen-driven “topo-tactics” still plays a role after the institution has decided to implement it. Fahlén also pointed out that this professionalization was initially functioning as a help to structure Alnablsi’s work instead of having it as an everyday activity that would hinder her other tasks in the konsthall, and today she has the opportunity of focusing on it for a few hours a week. Moreover, Certeau celebrates the “topo-tactics” as having the potential to change society little by little through the small activities that citizens perform every day. For him, the problem with the “topo-strategies” is that these are often time-limited and have a specific result in mind. With the daily programming at Tensta konsthall, I would argue that because they started off as Alnablsi’s “topo-tactics”, they have been released from a specific time frame and result orientation and can stay as a stable entity. The relationship between the “topo-tactics” and the “topo-strategies” becomes mutually beneficial in this sense. Fahlén phrased it like this:

If you compare it to other initiatives that are part of The Silent University in other parts of Europe, for instance, a challenge for many of these places has been to reach that level of stability. Is there an institution that is willing to have that sort of continuous plan? The logic of the art world is very project-based, so it is quite rare that people are thinking in continuous structures like we actually did at Tensta (ed. konsthall).

When saying that the art world is project-based, Fahlén pointed towards some of the same points as Certeau. The “topo-strategies” of the art world are often focused on time-limited projects, that have end results and that will often not be repeated. This also has to do with the way the art world functions economically since funding is often received from project to project, often with many constraints.

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182 Fahlén, *interview*. 
Interview 2: Fahyma Alnablsi: “I found myself in Tensta konsthall”

The interview with Fahyma Alnablsi was conducted on the 8th of May 2023 and lasted one hour. It took place in her home in Tensta and I interviewed her in Swedish. When interviewing Alnablsi I asked questions about the daily life at Tensta konsthall in connection to the activities Language Café, Citizen to Citizen, and the Women’s Café. I also asked her about her relationship to The Silent University and artist Ahmet Öğüt. The last part of the interview focused on Alnablsi’s relation to Tensta and which challenges she finds that the neighborhood faces today. Alnablsi has worked as receptionist and teacher at Tensta konsthall since 2011.

Mixing strategies and tactics

During the interview, it became clear to me that Alnablsi considers The Silent University a crucial part of all public activities she works with at the konsthall. When I asked her about how Citizen to Citizen and the Language Café was established at the konsthall she said:

I was already helping people out a lot every day in the konsthall. As I remember it, then I immediately started the Language Café when I met Ahmet (ed. Öğüt). After this, we started the Women’s Café. We understood that the women wanted to engage with each other without their husbands. Then we saw more and more refugees coming from different countries but especially Syria and Afghanistan, then I officially started Citizen to Citizen. All of this I consider a part of The Silent University.

This quote shows some interesting points about what the role of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall means for Alnablsi. Returning to Certeau’s theory, this reveals perspectives on the relationship between the activities, the institution, and The Silent University. Before the activities at the konsthall were professionalized in the institution, Alnablsi could be considered a citizen performing “topo-tactics” and when it was professionalized these could be seen as being transformed into “topo-strategies”. But since Alnablsi still had control and authority over the projects, they remain “topo-tactical” in their style. In the analysis of the interview with Emily Fahlén, I established the relationship between the role of Alnablsi and the activities at Tensta konsthall, as being a mutually dependent relationship that balances

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183 I have transcribed and translated the interview to English.
185 Alnablsi, interview.
Certeaus’s ideas on “topo-tactics” and “topo-strategies”. In addition, Alnablsi states that she considers all the activities as a part of The Silent University, but as mentioned, it is only the Language Cafè, that is officially considered a part of The Silent University, according to Tensta konsthall’s website.186 With Alnablsi’s understanding of the role of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall, then The Silent University could be considered a project that balances “topo-tactics” and “topo-strategies,” meaning that it both can exist within and outside of an institution and that the goal, when it exists inside the institution, is to use it as a tool for gaining recognition and justification but also to transform the way things are run.187 The artist can be considered someone who works within the “topo-strategy” but in this case, other people from outside the art world and the art institution are involved in the project, which does not have a limited time frame, and which point to it as having “topo-tactical” features. I would also argue that the project, especially the activities at the konsthall as they look today, has different purposes and does not result in physical artworks. This shows that The Silent University at Tensta konsthall cannot be considered only as a “topo-strategy”.

When I asked Alnablsi if she considered The Silent University an art project, her immediate answer was yes:

First and foremost because Ahmet is an artist, and he works with art. He has had exhibitions in many different places in the world. For me, art processes everything in life, therefore politics is art, social life is art, etc. I don't know if others think so or agree with me, but I think that art is what we are and life itself. […] The Silent University is first and foremost an art project.188

She later elaborated on this view by stating that: “As I mentioned before, since I work at Tensta konsthall, and it is an art institution and we work with art, it also helps me that The Silent University is an art project.”189 Alnablsi’s view on art is very broad; for her, everything can be art, and it depends on the context. The quote indicates that she sees The Silent University as being both social, and political, but most importantly an art project. Stating that it also helps her that it is an art project is interesting in this context. The Silent University are not the original authors of these daily activities but by having them as a part of the platform, it makes it easier for Alnablsi and Tensta konsthall to justify why it has a place in the art

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188 Alnablsi, interview.
189 Alnablsi, interview.
institution. It confirms the point about the entities being mutually dependent in their way of working with both “topo-tactics” and “topo-strategies”. One could imagine the importance for The Silent University, to have a branch that is well-functioning and has been running for over 10 years in Sweden. Also, this legitimizes their existence and provides them with something concrete to point towards when having to present The Silent University internationally. Alnablsi told me that she had visited the Istanbul Biennial in 2022 together with Öğüt and Maria Lind and that they had presented The Silent University and Alnablsi’s work at Tensta konsthall.  

**The Language Café as community and hospitality, Tensta as neighborhood**

Part of the interview focused on the role that The Silent University activities have played over the years and how they stand today. When asking these questions, I mainly focused on this in relation to the neighborhood of Tensta. The analysis of the interview with Fahlén showed how the project started off as not being as focused on the local community at Tensta konsthall as I had expected but, according to Alnablsi, this looks different today.

Alnablsi believes that a lot changed for Tensta konsthall after The Silent University was established. She described how prior to her employment at the konsthall she was very active in the neighborhood. This meant that many people in Tensta knew her and started coming to the konsthall. “When I could start my projects in collaboration with The Silent University openly and freely, then people really started coming to the konsthall. Children, women, men, etc. We really noticed a difference in the number of visitors when I started my projects.”

It is clear that Alnablsi also sees a difference between the activities that she is running at the konsthall and the lectures, workshops, seminars, and exhibitions that took place within the first year of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall. On a more personal note, Alnablsi describes how she had “found herself” in Tensta konsthall. When she arrived in Sweden, almost 30 years ago, she had to start over and that it was a difficult process. She used to be a teacher in Syria working at the konsthall and helping others gave her confidence. When establishing the Language Café and giving a lecture as part of The Silent University, she was back at teaching, but of course in a new setting. She described how helping others provides her knowledge and that she learns a lot from it.

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190 Alnablsi, interview.
191 Alnablsi, interview.
192 Alnablsi, interview.
In *Satellite Lifelines*, Isabel Löfgren focuses on the notion of hospitality and the relationship between the guest and the host. Löfgren considers the migrant or refugee as a guest and, according to her, the term hospitality implies the relationship between the host and the guest. Instead of referring to it as a migration crisis, Löfgren shifts the responsibility and calls it a crisis of hospitality. This means a shift in focus where the responsibility lies on the receiving country and not on the newcomer. I would argue that the Language Café, the Women’s Café, and Citizen to Citizen can be considered acts of hospitality provided by Tensta konsthall and executed by Alnablsi. When Alnablsi went into detail of what the activities mean to the users, it became clear how multifaceted these projects are. The Silent University describes itself first and foremost as a “solidarity based knowledge exchange platform,” and when speaking to Alnablsi, she both pointed out how much she herself learn from it, but also how personal these activities are. When speaking of the Women’s Café she stated that: “for example, sometimes one can have a hard time in their relationship, and then they sit with me and each other and talk.” When she mentioned the people coming to the Language Café, she had two examples of what can occur, the first is stated below:

It is often older people who find it difficult to adapt to society, they cannot work, for example. But they come to the language café. They learn some Swedish and go with us on excursions. Yes, sometimes there are people who almost never leave Tensta, only with us when we go on an excursion.

Later in the interview, Alnablsi commented on how she worked with the Language Café in 2015 when more migrants came to Sweden: “Many of those who came from the war, especially from Syria, had psychological problems and I was able to help several families. I took people to our allotment. When being in nature they could talk freely about their problems. It felt good that I could do something.” These two quotes also point towards Löfgren’s understanding of the term hospitality. Alnablsi states the importance of this activity by pointing out some of the things that occur outside of the actual learning situation. By welcoming people, listening to them, and having the classes structured more freely and by going on excursions and going to the allotment, Tensta konsthall and Alnablsi take on the responsibility of the host. Alnablsi even described how much she struggled when she came to

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193 Löfgren, *Satellite Lifelines*.
196 Alnablsi, *interview*.
197 Alnablsi, *interview*.
Sweden herself, and this experience, of remembering how it felt to be the “guest” or othered, and being a teacher from the beginning has motivated her in doing the work that she does.  

When Sara Ahmed speaks of community building, she highlights some of the things that are also at stake in Alnablsi’s statements. Ahmed points out that migrants are often also “strangers” to each other, since their stories, memories, and former understandings of home are different. Their stories are not pre-conditioned or similar, a community are therefore not automatically established by the mere existence of migrants in the same place. Instead, Ahmed argues that a community should be a place where memories and stories can be collectively shared.  

This is also what is at stake in the activities that Alnablsi is running. In the Language Café, Citizen to Citizen, and the Women’s café, the participants do not only engage with Alnablsi, but they also connect and talk to each other. According to Ahmed, a connection can also exist in the mutual feeling of estrangement. In this sense, I believe that Alnablsi’s own background of coming to Sweden from Syria plays an important role since she can also relate to the estrangement from what was considered home.  

When I asked Anablsi what happens at a regular Language Café, she pointed out that there are differences from how it used to be and how it is now:  

In the beginning, at least 30 people came to the lessons, and I taught alone. Then I came up with the idea to seek volunteers. I got several volunteers, most of them were pensioners who otherwise just sat at home, so I also noticed that it made a difference to them. […] The best thing about the language café is that people have different backgrounds, different religions, different languages, and everyone gets along well. There have never been any conflicts. I am very proud to lead this project. Now it's a little different, many of the ones who used come have started school. The migration laws has changed a lot, which also means that fewer immigrants come to Sweden.  

This quote shows that the community around the Language Café is not only established through the participants and Alnablsi, but also how volunteers, who are often already born in Sweden, also benefit from taking part in the activity. This confirms what Ahmed describes as community building, that it is not necessarily needed that people have similar backgrounds, instead, Ahmed points to the importance of having a concrete purpose. The purpose of the

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198 Löfgren, Satellite Lifelines, 42-43.  
199 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 91.  
200 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 92.  
201 Alnablsi, interview.
Language Café is for the participants to practice their Swedish, but they are also invited to join to practice their Arabic, which Alnablsi can help with as well. However, what the interview with Alnablsi also shows is that the Language Café is not unchangeable. By going to the allotment, or on excursions, and talking to the participants about their personal problems, the Language Café becomes a platform that can change its purpose in order to adapt to specific needs. This is also something that Ahmed points out to be very important when forming a community through a purpose. The identity and purpose of the activity need to be able to be rephrased collectively by the group. In this sense, the main purpose of the Language Café is to learn and teach language, and this desire is shared by participants, volunteers, and Alnablsi. Having this as a shared purpose functions as a structure for the activity, but the format is changeable according to the needs and these can change from day to day. Ahmed points out that a community does not need to stem from the same geographical area, meaning that members can come from different places. Many of the participants in the Language Café, according to Alnablsi, live in Tensta or the area around, but this does not apply to the volunteers for instance. Instead of assuming shared identity as that which forms the community, the Language Café uses the learning space and possibility of transforming a class into something else, depending on the needs, to create a community based on common purposes and a curiosity to share and learn.

At the end of the interview with Alnablsi I asked her about her view of the current state of the neighborhood of Tensta and what role she felt that The Silent University and Tensta konsthall has or could have in connection to this. Alnablsi expressed concern for Tensta, and she felt that some of the problems stemmed from a negative discourse coming from the media. Tensta has, according to her, received a very bad reputation over the years. She also pointed towards politics as a main source, a lot of schools have closed, and public initiatives and buildings have been closed or privatized. In her words,

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203 Alnablsi, interview.
204 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 94.
205 Alnablsi, interview.
Eventually, the Swedes began to move away. Why do you give all the immigrants apartments in the same place, in Tensta, Rinkeby, and these suburbs? They don't give apartments to the Swedes here, or the Swedes don't want to be here, they are on Södermalm and in Täby. It is a result of wrong politics. In her section on neighborhoods, Ahmed describes how discourses around so-called ‘stranger-danger’ are defined as someone who is marked bodily different and is narrated as someone who threatens a place or property. When a neighborhood is facing issues, it is often marked in public discourse as a neighborhood in ‘crisis.’ These discourses, especially when being repeated in the media, can ensure that certain neighborhoods maintain their negative reputation, which Alnablsi points out in the quote about Tensta. This also affects the inhabitants in a specific neighborhood and one of the tools to change these narratives, and feelings of hostility is by community building. Of course, a lot of factors must be considered when analyzing the situation and history of a neighborhood, but in this context, I chose to focus on Alnablsi’s statements and Ahmed’s theory. I will return to some points about Tensta as a neighborhood and local community in the discussion.

206 Alnablsi, interview.
207 Ahmed, Strange Encounters, 30.
Chapter 3: Discussion

This discussion connects the findings from the first two chapters, in order to answer the third research question: What is the current state of The Silent University, as a socially engaged project and artwork placed in the context of Tensta konsthall? This is done by delving into The Silent University as an embedded part of Tensta konsthall and what this implies for both the konsthall and The Silent University as a socially engaged art project. I will discuss the changes that the project has gone through and its current state.

When looking at The Silent University as an artwork, I found that it was formed by the artist and initiator Ahmet Öğüt, but that it, due to its collaborative features, is executed differently depending on where and how it is established. The purpose of establishing the project at Tensta konsthall seems multifaceted. It was done in relation to the project Tensta Museum and was part of an exhibition but also had the purpose of producing migration history in Tensta and beyond. The visual identity and formulation of The Silent University in the pamphlet shown as part of the exhibition mimicked the aesthetical frame of actual universities. When it is exhibited in the context of an art exhibition, in an art institution, the visual language becomes symbols that point towards an educational space. By including the pamphlet edited by Emily Fahlén in the exhibition, the visitor was also invited to learn more about the project and the Swedish context of it.

Umberto Eco finds that certain artworks can change the audience’s view or perspective on a specific topic. This mainly happens, according to Eco, when an artist uses phenomena from other scientific fields and translates them into an artwork. In relation to this, Claire Bishop problematizes socially engaged art practice’s ability to be translated into artworks of high quality, but she does state, that the point of such exhibitions could be to make the audience aware that the art field and the social field can be connected. I would argue, that the mediation of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall in the beginning served the purpose of communicating the collaboration and its programming to the audience as well as sharing information about certain issues around migration politics locally as well as globally.
Öğüt’s statements about his role as an artist showed that the project could follow the line of thought in Eco’s theory of the “open” work, referring to the work as being able to be interpreted by other artists. In the case of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall, it is interpreted by the staff at Tensta konsthall as well as by the consultants and members recruited in the process. Moving the lectures out of the art institution and into a more ‘traditional’ lecture hall shows that the team was focused on fulfilling the initial purpose of The Silent University, and this also made them avoid the risk of exploiting the lecturers, who were, due to their refugee status, in a sensitive position. With this said, it is important to point out that the project only had funding to last a year, this means that the lectures and seminars directly connected to The Silent University only lasted till the beginning of 2014. What was left was the Language Café and Citizen to Citizen. Both projects were initiated and are still run by Fahyma Alnablsi. The Language Café was established in dialogue with The Silent University and Öğüt and is still an official part of The Silent University. When it comes to Citizen to Citizen, my findings were that this is not considered an official part of The Silent University, but both Fahlén and Alnablsi stated that it is. A reason for it not to include in the official programming could be that its purpose is too far from the initial educational purposes of The Silent University. I would although argue that the project fits in the framework when it comes to the purpose of acting in solidarity with refugees. In this sense, it is a project that welcomes people to come and receive help with bureaucracy that can be hard to navigate, even if their position is sensitive and difficult.

Both Fahlén and Öğüt pointed towards the logic of the art world as being very project-based, making it difficult to implement longer-lasting activities and initiatives.208 But one could argue, that the same goes for The Silent University at Tensta konsthall. The initial part of the project was funded and executed within a year. In this sense, the critique of the project-based reality of the art world is confirmed in the example of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall. If Alnablsi had not had activities in mind and the willingness to execute them, one could ask whether The Silent University would still be an active part of Tensta konsthall. Moreover, several of the material I analyzed mentions funding issues. In the interview with Fahlén, she stated that a project like The Silent University could not work if they could not pay the lecturers a fee, since the goal is to recognize educational backgrounds.209 However,

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208 Fahlén, interview; Malchazer, The Silent University – Towards a Transversal Pedagogy, 14.
209 Fahlén, interview.
the pamphlet created for the exhibition and establishment of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall states that the project runs without monetary fees but with an alternative currency of time and knowledge. These conflicting statements show the difficulty of establishing this type of project. On one hand, not having a payment system is a way of being in opposition to the bureaucracy of educational systems and creating a new system. On the other hand, it seems conflicting to do so when the purpose of The Silent University is to recognize the educational and professional backgrounds of refugees and asylum seekers, and a very clear way of being acknowledged is to receive payment.

When looking closely at the development of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall since its inauguration in 2013, one could say that its transformation has been from being a project that was focused on knowledge exchange, and alternative education to becoming a socially engaged art project embedded in the local community. Both has the focus on helping and recognizing marginalized groups in society, but this is executed differently. There are still knowledge exchange and learning at play in the activities that Alnablsi runs but as the interview showed, the main focus lies in the connections that are built along the way. Alnablsi has a strong connection to Tensta, and I would argue that the activities originate from focusing on what the neighborhood needs. The clearest example of this is Citizen to Citizen. As both Fahlén and Alnablsi pointed out, then this was work that Alnablsi was already doing, maybe even without really noticing it. She is not a lawyer or expert in the Swedish migration or tax system but her devotion to helping others has driven the project forward.

Today, Alnablsi runs The Silent University activities by herself, with some help from a few volunteers. She is paid her normal salary provided by the Tensta konsthall, and this, combined with the new direction’s willingness to continue the project must be the two main factors for why The Silent University still has a branch at Tensta konsthall. During the interview with Alnablsi she told me that she is working on teaching new staff members how to take part in her activities. She has a strong willingness in wanting them to survive but when looking at the structure of how it is run today, I find it hard to see the activities at the konsthall without Alnablsi’s presence.

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210 Fahlén, The Silent University – Tensta Reader, 3.
211 Alnablsi, interview.
In relation to this, my findings also show that the project started out with building a community, using Sara Ahmed’s definition, around The Silent University, where several people were included in deciding its structure in Sweden. Today, I would still argue that The Silent University activities can be considered a community, but it is driven by the willingness of Alnablsi and is therefore in a fragile state. Delving into The Silent University’s role in this situation, I would argue that having it as ambassador for Alnabli’s activities helps strengthen the position of the project in Tensta because it also, as mentioned earlier, can attract the art world, in the sense that it is an internationally known art project. My previous research also shows that a lot has already been written about The Silent University, including its branch in Stockholm. However, when thinking of community, then I would also argue that Alnablsi’s position is unique. She is a part of the community of the daily activities at the konsthall but also part of the larger, international network of The Silent University. This shows that she is not only encouraged by the institution but also by The Silent University itself. The position of the three entities The Silent University, Tensta konsthall, and Alnablsi, or her activities, can be said to function in a mutually dependent relationship, meaning that they all three benefit from each other. Alnablsi benefits from The Silent University because it brings her work recognition and status, The Silent University benefits from having succeeded in having a longer-lasting collaboration that works on a daily basis, and the konsthall benefits since The Silent University is a well-known and recognized art project in the art world.

Claire Bishop is often critical towards pedagogic art projects that are turned into exhibitions or documented for them to be shown to an (art) audience. In her section on “Aesthetic Education”, she reformulates a famous sentence by French philosopher Félix Guattari, she writes: “If artists ignore the double finality, viewers may rightly wonder whether Guattari’s question should, in fact, be reversed: how do we bring a work of art to life as though it were a classroom?” The double finality she is pointing at is the duality between being successful both in the social field and in the art field, meaning that a project has to be equally good in both but at the same time critical towards them. Bishop finds this as one of the biggest challenges for pedagogic and socially engaged art projects. But when looking at Tensta konsthall today, and Alnablsi’s work with The Silent University, the konsthall seems like they are not focusing on appealing to the art audience. Except for maybe a few posters and pamphlets in the reception of the art space, the project is fairly invisible, maybe even, silent.

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212 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 274.
213 Bishop, Artificial Hells, 273.
This study shows that The Silent University has become an embedded part of Tensta konsthall, and Alnablsi considers it very important that the activities are connected to The Silent University. When one looks closely, both in the physical art space, but also at written sources and archives, The Silent University has a strong mediation, both visually and in writing. In addition to this, the activities take place in an actual physical classroom installed in Tensta konsthall and built for, among others, this purpose.\textsuperscript{214} The Silent University has changed in its context of Tensta konsthall but it is still connected to the art world, especially in an international context. Having daily activities at the konsthall such as the Language Café as a part of The Silent University could therefore be said to adapt to both the art world and the social world, and when looking at how the activities are run, I would rephrase Bishop’s rephrasing into it being; an artwork brought to life as though it were a classroom inside an art institution.

\textsuperscript{214} Lind, \textit{Tensta Museum: Reports from New Sweden}, 74.
Summary

This study researched The Silent University and its role at Tensta konsthall. This was done by looking into various materials. The secondary sources used as material consisted of publications that dealt with the establishment of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall and had both images and texts. The published conversation between Florian Malchazer and Ahmet Öğüt dealt with the role of the artist and art institution in relation to The Silent University. The primary sources were two interviews with curator and former project manager at Tensta konsthall, Emily Fahlén, and receptionist and teacher at Tensta konsthall, Fahyma Alnablsi and focused on the establishment and continuation of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall. All the material provided information on the establishment and current state of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall and was investigated through the theoretical framework of Claire Bishop and Umberto Eco and the phenomenology of Sara Ahmed and Michel de Certeau.

In response to the first research question: How can The Silent University and its implementation at the art institution Tensta konsthall be considered a socially engaged transformative and performative artwork? The first chapter looked at The Silent University as an exhibitable, disseminated artwork, focusing on the exhibition and project Tensta Museum and the role of the artist and the institution. The installation exhibited in the exhibition Tensta Museum at Tensta konsthall which also included a copy of the pamphlet “The Silent University – Tensta Reader” showed that the project had contained features that could mark it as an “open” and “informal” work according to Eco. This was shown in the sense that the installation mimicked aesthetics from other fields, especially the educational field, and that it was able to be interpreted in several ways. Claire Bishop's distinctions between immediate participants and subsequent audiences addressed the potential tension between catering to art audiences and maintaining the project's primary goals, avoiding the risk of exploitation of marginalized groups. The decision to limit lecture attendance to those who understand the languages used helps maintain the integrity of The Silent University’s knowledge exchange. Öğüt’s role as artist and initiator of The Silent University showed that the work can also be considered “open” in the sense that Öğüt is the author, but that Tensta konsthall and its staff were part of concluding its role in the institution.
In response to the research question: 2) How has the practice of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall evolved since its inauguration? The second chapter answered by delving into the conducted interviews with Alnablsi and Fahlén and focused on the phenomenology of Sara Ahmed and Michel de Certeau in order to investigate what methods were used in order to establish the project and how it has evolved over time. This analysis showed that the establishment of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall can be considered a community building process, according to Ahmed. It also showed that the current The Silent University activities at the konsthall today balance Certeau’s notions of “topo-tactics” and “topo-strategies”, meaning that it initially was citizen-driven but now is located in the art institution and has received acknowledgment and structure from it. The analysis also showed that the project has gone from being a community-driven project that was more spread out geographically to now being locally embedded in the neighborhood of Tensta. Ahmed’s theory on community and neighborhood showed that the activities can be considered community building which can help a neighborhood that has received a negative reputation, which Alnablsi stressed in the interview. The activities can also be considered as acts of hospitality, according to the theory of Isabel Löfgren.

Lastly, the third chapter functioned as a concluding discussion and aimed to answer the third research question: What is the current state of The Silent University, as a socially engaged project and artwork placed in the context of Tensta konsthall? The initial collaboration between The Silent University and Tensta konsthall, aimed to fulfill the project’s goal by granting asylum-seekers and refugees the opportunity to use their professional skills received in the country they left. This resulted in lectures that took place in ABF. Due to a lack of funding, this part of The Silent University only lasted a bit over a year but simultaneously Alnablsi established activities that resulted in the longer-lasting active The Silent University branch, which is still active today. The Silent University’s integration within Tensta konsthall is not as visible anymore and does not seem to prioritize the art audience’s recognition. The project’s activities, like the Language Café, remain largely invisible but due to the status of The Silent University as a known international project in the art field, the institution still benefits from having it included. This chapter showed that The Silent University, Tensta konsthall, and Alnablsi’s activity have a mutually dependent relationship, benefiting from each other's recognition and contributions. With this said, one cannot help to find the current state fragile since it is so dependent on Alnablsi’s presence.
To conclude, by using qualitative methods and the frame of institutional ethnography, this study underscores the role of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall in fostering community, challenging perceptions, and offering platforms for marginalized people. By engaging with the theoretical framework provided, this study enriched an understanding of how socially engaged art initiatives can be a catalyst for prompting reflections on the interconnectedness of artistic endeavors, institutions, and the communities they serve. However, the study also reveals a fragility inherent in the project’s current state. Its sustainability remains intertwined with the commitment of Alnablsi, emphasizing the need for continued support and collaboration. As Bishop points out, excellent ideas of socially engaged and pedagogical art practices often rely on a specific person (the artist). This is also one of the reasons for why the art world can be seen as project-based, since an artist moves from project to project, and is often financially dependent on creating exhibitable work. In this sense, long term socially engaged projects can be hard to receive funding for, especially in such a project- and exhibition-oriented art world. In the case of The Silent University at Tensta konsthall the artist, Öğüt, has outsourced the responsibility to the art institution and the responsibility is therefore currently theirs. The project seems dependent on the work and dedication of Alnablsi. However, I would argue that putting this trust in the art institution can lead to fruitful socially engaged practices taking place in art institutions. Having Alnablsi run the project in Tensta konsthall also makes sure that the activities adapt to the needs of the neighborhood and community and adjusts to Alnablsi’s skillset. Alnablsi also highlighted the importance of The Silent University’s status as an artwork since it helps her with justifying and backing the continuation of these activities. I would argue, when looking at the findings of this study, that the key to long-term sustainable socially engaged initiatives in art institutions is to have an artist formulate the project and afterwards letting it to be up to the institution to willingly invest, sustain and transform the project so it adapts to the needs of the local community.
Bibliography

Unpublished sources


Books and articles


### Electronic sources


List of Images
