



REHEARSALS OF REFUSAL

Potential History and Its Anti-Imperial Onto-Epistemology in Artistic Research

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Abstract

This essay explores Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's concept of potential history as articulated in her book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, focusing specifically on its relationship to artistic research practices. By analysing Azoulay's curatorial project *Errata* and Theresa Weber's exhibition *Alle Menschen werden Brüder*, this essay demonstrates how artistic research projects can critically engage with and embody the refusal of imperial epistemologies advocated for by Azoulay. Azoulay's exhibition uses archival recontextualisation to critically interrogate historical narratives, authority, and authenticity, while Weber's work addresses themes of hybridity, identity, and belonging through artistic reinterpretation of historical narratives. Together, these projects highlight the potential of artistic research to actively challenge dominant epistemologies and create space for alternative forms of historical understanding.

Keywords

potential history, anti-imperialism, artistic research, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, Theresa Weber

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1. Introduction

What if art workers, museum workers, photographers and historians went on strike? What if we all went on strike, until our world was repaired? This exercise in political imagination forms the red thread throughout *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019) by photographic theorist, documentary filmmaker and curator Ariella Aïsha Azoulay. While Azoulay fully acknowledges that the struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors is an important form of strike, she emphasises that this is not the only way a strike can be enacted. In this book, she encourages us to see a strike as an opportunity to tend to our shared world, which includes critically reflecting on one's own privileges, stepping away from them, and repurposing them in productive ways.¹ "Imagine a strike not out of despair", she writes, "but as a moment of grace in which a potential history is all of a sudden perceptible, a potential history of a world that is not organized by imperial and racial capitalist principles".²

Potential History presents itself as an onto-epistemological experiment that challenges the imperial foundations of knowledge. It focuses on reevaluating relationships severed by imperialist epistemologies—between humans and non-humans, the living and the dead, the past and the present, the documented and undocumented, and so on. *Potential History* implores us to recognise that the world need not be as it is and that we can imagine better realities. Importantly, this vision doesn't require new inventions but a revisitation and repairing of the vibrant life-worlds stripped from us by imperialism and racial capitalism. In her book, Azoulay doesn't claim to have a completed thought process or theory in place, proposing potential history instead as an incessant rehearsal, a continuous process of imagining and practicing new ways of being with others by rejecting imperialist ways of knowing. This rehearsal is not about recovering isolated moments or experiences but about fostering conditions where plural human experiences can thrive. It involves dismantling the imperialist logic that governs concepts like citizenship, replacing them with practices rooted in care, relationality, and mutual respect.

¹ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso Books, 2019), 157.

² Ibid, 159.

Although Azoulay does not explicitly discuss art strikes in *Potential History*, her conceptualisation of strikes within history and photography invites parallels to similar movements in the broader art world. Art strikes, as discussed by Stewart Martin in an article for Mute Magazine, represent a significant form of resistance within the art community, challenging the norms and structures of the art world that are shaped by capitalist values. These strikes question the relationship between art and daily life, critique the commercialisation of art, and explore the political potential of artists' collective actions.³ The concept has historical roots in surrealism, notably André Breton's 1925 call for a general strike of artists and intellectuals. The concept has evolved from Breton's initial proposal to later interpretations by figures like Alain Jouffroy, who advocated for the revolutionary abolition of art as part of anticapitalist culture.^{4 5 6} Jouffroy's call to action resonates with Azoulay's deconstruction of the imperial persona of the artist and the structures of the art world in relation to looting and violence, which will be touched upon later in this essay.

Although curating, like artistic practice, is connected to the art world and its imperialist roots, Azoulay explicitly refuses the label of artist, stating: "I am not an artist,

³ Stewart Martin, 'Art Strikes: An Inventory', *Mute Magazine*, 1 May 2020, <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/art-strikes-inventory>.

⁴ Abigail Susik, 'Art Is the Armchair in Which the State Sits for Its Own Pleasure: Breton's Surrealist Art Strike and Jouffroy's Postsurrealist Abolition of Art', *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies*, 26 August 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25896377-00501002>.

⁵ In *What's to be done about Art?* (1968), Alain Jouffroy wrote: 'Let us have no illusions about it: most "art critics" are going to carry on as if art were not abolished, as if art couldn't be abolished; most "artists" are going to continue to believe in the "artistic" character of their production; most gallery-goers, art lovers and, of course, buyers are going to ignore the fact that the abolition of art can really occur in the actual time and space of a pre-revolutionary situation like that of May 1968. It is essential that the minority advocate the necessity of going on an active art strike, using the "machines" of the culture industry so that we can more effectively set it in total contradiction with itself. The intention is not to end the rule of production, but to change the most adventurous part of "artistic" production into the production of revolutionary ideas, forms and techniques.' Quotation found through the following link: https://www.thing.de/projekte/7:9#/y_The_Abolition_of_Art.html

⁶ Contemporary artists like Hito Steyerl have further explored art strikes through works that resonate with meme protest culture and the *era of riots*. This is examined by Dominique Routhier in the journal article *Memes Uden Mål: Hito Steyerl Og Kunststrejken 2.0*, written for Kultur Og Klasse. If interested, you can read it through the following link: <https://tidsskrift.dk/kok/article/view/137180/181586>

and I am not trying to produce things that will have value in or from the art world."⁷ Instead, her role as a curator allows her greater control over context, counteracting the risk of having her work reinterpreted or decontextualised by others. "Imperialism reproduces itself through a series of curatorial practices", Azoulay explains, "and developing different approaches is part of my commitment to unlearning imperialism."⁸ Of course, just as she explores different approaches to curating, someone else might try to do the same in artistic practice. Later in this essay, I will discuss Theresa Weber's work, a German-Jamaican artist whose work critically confronts themes such as (un)belonging, imperial violence, hybridity, and archival imagery, as an example of this.

Potential History often veers into the terrains of the artistic, which can be confusing to a reader expecting to read dry and literal critical theory. In *Potential History*, Azoulay speaks to the imagination by painting with broad strokes, writing with poetic language, using metaphors and indirect ways of conveying the potentials of her ideas. However, there is a noticeable lack of explicit recognition and detailed exploration of these stylistic choices. Furthermore, the text does not provide a definitive analysis of the role that artistic research plays within the framework of potential history. Although Azoulay does not explicitly label her practice as artistic research, I argue that her interdisciplinary approach — blending theory, speculation, visual methods, and curatorial practice, can indeed be understood as a form of artistic research.

After a brief introduction of artistic research and laying the contextual groundwork for my understanding of *Potential History*, this essay will briefly introduce two case studies. While the limited scope of this paper prevents an in-depth exploration, I will analyse Ariella Azoulay's exhibition *Errata* alongside Theresa Weber's exhibition *Alle Menschen werden Brüder*, serving two different examples of artistic research projects exploring the concept of potential history. These two exhibitions offer complementary yet distinct approaches: Azoulay experiments with curatorial practice — disrupting

⁷ Sabrina Alli, 'Ariella Aïsha Azoulay: "It Is Not Possible to Decolonize the Museum without Decolonizing the World."', *Guernica Mag*, 3 December 2020, <https://www.guernicamag.com/miscellaneous-files-ariella-aisha-azoulay/>.

⁸ Ibid.

traditional, imperialist ways of categorising and presenting knowledge; meanwhile, Weber's artistic practice challenges modernist notions of individual artistic genius by emphasising interconnectedness, cultural context, and collective histories.

This essay is part of an ongoing artistic investigation into potential history, belonging, and auto-ethnography within my MFA in Fine Arts. Writing this text will deepen my understanding of potential history as a framework for artistic research, helping me situate my own artistic work within a broader context. Additionally, it provides a critical framework and theoretical foundation for my graduation project, where I further explore themes of belonging, refusal of imperialist epistemologies, and archival practices.

2. A brief introduction of artistic research

Artistic research is not easily or unproblematically defined and categorised. In Lucy Cotter's expanded second edition of *Reclaiming Artistic Research* (2024), she writes: "Artistic research" circulates as a free-floating term in the mainstream art world, little-noticed, it seems, except that more and more artists who engage with wider social, cultural and political questions in their work describe their practices as research-driven.'

In an article for the *Nordic Journal of Art and Research*, Nina Malterud writes that artistic research is "understood internationally to mean research in and through the arts. It is the artist's own experience and insight that are the point of departure for artistic research, unlike research on the arts, which is based on looking in from the outside."⁹ The field emphasises the intertwining of ontology, epistemology, and methodology, with artistic works or processes serving as both means and ends of enquiry.¹⁰ Within curatorial contexts, artistic research provides a vital bridge between theoretical discourse and artistic

⁹ Nina Malterud, 'Artistic Research – Necessary and Challenging', *Nordic Journal of Art and Research* 1, no. 2 (2012), https://www.ninamalterud.no/pdf/tekster_kunstutd/Malterud_Artistic_Research_2012.pdf.

¹⁰ Valeria V. Kononchuk, 'Artistic Research: Approaches to Definition, Critique, and Specifics in Russia', *International Journal of Cultural Research* 51, no. 2 (2023), https://doi.org/10.52173/2079-1100_2023_2_99.

practice, merging academic and artistic realms.¹¹

According to Lucy Cotter, however, artistic research in general seems to be understood almost synonymously with doing a PhD or other forms of academic research within fine arts,¹² which is why she argues for a reclaiming of artistic research, reorienting research away from rigid academic models by centering the artist's creative processes and experiential knowledge.¹³ Cotter claims that artistic research differs fundamentally from academic research because it follows its own internal logic instead of strictly academic paradigms. Artists and curators develop ideas that cross boundaries and resist formal categories, guided by methods and sensibilities distinct from conventional academic structures.¹⁴ Quoting Susan Sontag, Cotter points out that every artwork represents a distinct "form or paradigm or model of knowing something," an insight that highlights the potential for artistic research in particular for experimentation with epistemologies. This essay aligns with Cotter's view by examining artistic research as a practice capable of challenging and unlearning the imperial epistemologies that conventional knowledge structures frequently reproduce, allowing artistic and curatorial practice to serve as both enquiry and knowledge production.

3. Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism

Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism (2019) is 600-page volume by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay that provides a non-linear exploration of empire and the foundational concepts that give rise to imperial violence.¹⁵ In it, she calls for a refusal and unlearning of the logics of imperialism and its tools, such as history, archives and sovereignty.

¹¹ Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir, 'Curatorial Research as Boundary Work', *The Museum Journal* 64, no. 3 (2021): 421–38, <https://doi.org/10.1111/CURA.12417>.

¹² This is also something I have observed from looking into a lot of the books and articles we have in the Gothenburg University library on the theme of artistic research. Many of them don't really question this assumption that artistic research is something that is done on the academic level.

¹³ Lucy Cotter, *Reclaiming Artistic Research* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, n.d.), 527.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 524–527.

¹⁵ C. Heike Schotten, 'Before Violence, after Empire: Ariella Azoulay's *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 50, no. 1 (2021): 91–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2020.1842017>.

Unlearning tools of imperial knowledge creation doesn't intend to call for decontextualisation, on the contrary, according to Azoulay it is imperialism that decontextualises by imposing a limiting worldview in which people, objects, and events are separated across time, space, and the body politic (which determines who is a citizen and who is a refugee).¹⁶ The three-fold separation across time, space and the body politic, is what Azoulay calls *the imperial shutter*. This term refers to the shutter on the lens of a camera. In the prologue of the book Azoulay writes that the shutter “acts like a verdict—a very limited portion of information is captured, framed and made appropriable by those who become its right holders.” The camera shutter's click embodies the three types of violence Azoulay associates with empire: it creates a time division of *before* and *after*, sets a spatial divide between the photographer and the subject, and enforces a cultural distinction between those who control the technology and those who are merely being observed and captured on photograph. These three ways in which the camera's shutter functions reflect “the three axes of imperial violence” in which time is defined as linear and forward-moving, space as controlled by borders and divisions, and humanity as classified into hierarchical categories based on race, nationality, religion, or ethnicity.^{17 18}

The focus on progress and fetishisation of newness¹⁹ is something Azoulay ascribes especially to modernity and imperialism, so instead “this book is tuned to a different modality: that of rehearsal, reversal, rewinding, repairing, renewing, reacquiring, redistributing, readjusting, reallocating, and on and on.”²⁰ Instead of focusing on going forward, potential history turns around and goes backward, to the moment right before the

¹⁶ This is my interpretation of her critique of imperialism's “discrete” objects: histories and places that have been ripped away from their original life-worlds, decontextualised by looting institutions and the forceful creation of borders where there used to be interconnected communities. She mentions this many times throughout the book.

¹⁷ C. Heike Schotten, ‘Before Violence, after Empire: Ariella Azoulay's Potential History; Unlearning Imperialism’, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 50, no. 1 (2021): 91–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2020.1842017>.

¹⁸ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 369.

¹⁹ C. Heike Schotten, ‘Before Violence, after Empire: Ariella Azoulay's Potential History; Unlearning Imperialism’, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 50, no. 1 (2021): 91–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2020.1842017>.

²⁰ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 56.

injustice happened. As Heike Schotten has observed in her review for the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, potential history “is neither nostalgia for a lost past nor romanticization of some pre-imperial plenitude”. Instead, Schotten writes, it is “an acknowledgement that the human condition and the worlds it has built continue to exist, even in the face of empire’s determinative violence”.²¹

In the preface of the book, Azoulay explains that since she was born on Palestinian land occupied by the Israeli state, she was automatically granted "Israeli" citizenship. This citizenship is predicated on the displacement of “prior belonging and unbelonging to communities destroyed or shaped by violence”.²² She explains how her father was an Algerian Jewish migrant and her mother a Jewish Palestinian, both being identities that were forcefully erased from people’s life-worlds when Israel was created in 1947. To embrace her previously erased Algerian Jewish identity, Ariella now chose to adopt the middle name Aïsha, which would have been passed on to her from her grandmother if it had not been for the erasure of her father’s Arab lineage. A small radical gesture of refusal in the context of the state of Israel.

Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism is written as a protest, a refusal ‘to be an “Israeli”, to think like an Israeli, to identify myself as an Israeli, or to be recognised as an Israeli.’ This refusal represents the form of strike central to Azoulay's *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, illustrating a foundational act of protest within the framework she proposes. She refuses to accept the world post-partition, where “Israelis” are deemed citizens and Palestinians are deemed refugees. She refuses to accept that this horrible injustice is already in the past and unchangeable. This was the starting point of the book: an auto-ethnographic exploration of history, politics and belonging. “Without undermining differences between places”, she explains, “situations, and lived experiences, I tried to use this change of scale to consolidate an anti-imperial onto-epistemological framework through which everything and every place affected by western imperialism could be

²¹ C. Heike Schotten, ‘Before Violence, after Empire: Ariella Azoulay’s *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*’, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 50, no. 1 (2021): 91–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2020.1842017>.

²² Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), xiii–xv.

thought together.”²³ Onto-epistemology, popularised by posthumanist thinker Karen Barad, relates to the inseparable nature of being and knowing. Barad emphasises that knowledge is not something acquired from an external standpoint but emerges from our active participation in the world’s ongoing becoming. This concept challenges the traditional divide between epistemology (the study of knowledge) and ontology (the study of being), which stems from assumptions about fixed distinctions such as human versus nonhuman or mind versus body. Instead, onto-epistemology focuses on understanding how specific intra-actions, mutual and constitutive processes of entities coming into being, play a crucial role in shaping reality.²⁴ The onto-epistemology of potential history is simultaneously one of refusal and insistence. As I have discussed earlier in this essay, it is a refusal to acknowledge the separation between people and objects, past and present, dead and alive, documented and undocumented. It gives objects the same type of agency as it does to people. Which is important, because the objects belong to the life-worlds of the people and vice versa. When there is an insistence to be with “others across the triple imperial divide of time, space, and the body politic”, the separation of past and present stops being a neutral given, and the once unimaginable becomes a potential again.²⁵

In conclusion, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* not only critiques historical narratives shaped by imperialism but also acts as a manifesto for reimagining our collective past and present. Through her concept of potential history, Azoulay invites us to radically re-imagine historical consciousness, urging us to refuse the divisive constructs of imperialist ideologies and instead embrace a more open-ended, interconnected understanding of human relations.

3.1. From Gaze to Shutter: Azoulay’s Reframing of Imperial Visuality

²³ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), xiii–xv.

²⁴ Karen Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801–31, <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>.

²⁵ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 199.

Ariella Azoulay's concept of the imperial shutter, introduced in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, is a striking intervention in how we think about imperialism, visuality, and power. Yet, one cannot help but notice her deliberate avoidance of a term that seems to hover just outside the edges of her argument: the *imperial gaze*. The *imperial gaze* is a well-established concept in postcolonial, visual, and feminist studies, critiquing the ways in which domination has historically been enacted through systems of seeing and representing the *other*. The imperial gaze, rooted in colonial perspectives and Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* (1978)²⁶, shapes dominant narratives and perceptions of the world and it extends beyond physical structures to shape contemporary realities through colonial legacies.²⁷ It refers to the perspective of western colonisers viewing and interpreting non-western cultures through a lens of superiority and exoticism.²⁸ This concept is rooted in 19th-century imperialism, which fostered attitudes of cultural arrogance and white western superiority.²⁹ The imperial gaze is often associated with the male gaze, a term coined by John Berger but popularised by Laura Mulvey,³⁰ both representing power dynamics in observation.³¹ Challenging this perspective involves critically examining dominant narratives and considering alternative ways of perceiving the world, as well as acknowledging the contested nature of multicultural and postcolonial realities.³²

²⁶ Interestingly enough, Edward Saïd is never mentioned in *Potential History*. There is however a very tiny acknowledgement of the term that was coined by him; orientalism, grouped together with terms like subaltern and hybridity under the umbrella term *incommensurable experiences*.

²⁷ Neil Lowe, 'Mother's Ruin: Refracting the Imperial Gaze' (Masters Dissertation, Otago Polytechnic, 2023), <https://www.researchbank.ac.nz/items/b15ac6b5-e0fd-42dc-8063-c2aa5a6a4d98>.

²⁸ Ruth Watts, 'Education, Empire and Social Change in Nineteenth Century England', *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 45, no. 6 (2009): 773–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230903407519>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Aoiffe Walsh, 'What Is Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze Theory?', 3 December 2023, <https://www.perlego.com/knowledge/study-guides/what-is-laura-mulveys-male-gaze-theory/>.

³¹ Noemí Pereira-Ares, 'The East Looks at the West, the Woman Looks at the Man: A Study of the Gaze in Brick Lane by Monica Ali', *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 46 (2013): 71–81, https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.20128947.

³² Neil Lowe, 'Mother's Ruin: Refracting the Imperial Gaze' (Masters Dissertation, Otago Polytechnic, 2023), <https://www.researchbank.ac.nz/items/b15ac6b5-e0fd-42dc-8063-c2aa5a6a4d98>.

The imperial gaze has long served as a metaphor for the ways colonial powers imposed their perspectives onto the world. It describes how the act of looking, only seemingly a passive gesture, becomes an active tool of domination.³³ Assuming that this was indeed her starting point, Azoulay developed a broader triadic model of photography that moves beyond the traditional spectator-image relationship to include the photographer, subject, and spectator, which she calls *the citizenry of photography*.³⁴ By sidestepping the imperial gaze, Azoulay avoids the narrower, hierarchical framework that term often implies, a one-directional dynamic where the coloniser looks and the colonised is seen. Instead, the imperial shutter highlights systemic, structural, and material processes. It shifts the discussion from individuals (the viewer and the viewed) to institutions (archives, museums, states) and their role in enacting and perpetuating imperial violence.

In addition, Azoulay's imperial shutter shifts the focus from looking to framing, from vision to the violent processes by which imperial systems disassemble and reorder the world. For Azoulay, the shutter, the mechanical action of capturing and partitioning reality, represents the broader imperial logic of fragmentation.³⁵ The camera's shutter is not merely a visual tool but a metaphor for how imperialism actively severs interconnected lives, histories, and spaces. In her words, the violent operation of the shutter "can transform an individual rooted in her life-world into a refugee, a looted object into a work of art, a whole shared world into a thing of the past, and the past itself into a separate time zone, a tense that lies apart from both present and future."³⁶ The shutter, unlike the gaze, emphasises action: the slicing of time and space into consumable, isolated units.

Lastly, the imperial shutter also challenges assumptions about the neutrality of visual technologies like photography. Where the imperial gaze might interrogate who is looking

³³ Edward Saïd, *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1987).

³⁴ Justin Carville, 'Intolerable Gaze: The Social Contract of Photography', *Photography and Culture* 3, no. 3 (2010): 353–58, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2752/175145109X12804957025750>.

³⁵ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 405.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 6.

and how they look, the imperial shutter asks us to consider the act of taking the image itself. What does it mean to freeze a moment, to displace it out of its context and assign it a new, imperial one? In bypassing the imperial gaze, Azoulay reframes the conversation on imperial visibility. Asking the reader to move beyond the metaphors of vision and representation and to confront the physical, structural violence embedded in imperial practices of framing and fragmentation. Her imperial shutter is not just a critique of how we see but a call to rethink how imperialism actively transforms the world and, importantly, how we might begin to undo it.

3.2. Photography and archival imagery

Azoulay's call to resist the imperialist treatment of photographs and documents is tied to her emphasis on contextualisation. In the chapter *The Art of Not Displaying Everything Everywhere* (pp. 135-140), she critiques the imperialist tendency to treat objects and images as discrete artefacts that can be displayed without regard for their origins or the conditions of their creation. She argues for an ethical approach to photography that reintroduces the relational contexts of images, emphasising the networks of care, power, and history they belong to. Azoulay's own use of archival photographs in *Potential History* exemplifies this practice. The book features over 200 images, many of which she traced in pencil because the archives from which they came imposed restrictions on their use, including prohibiting the addition of captions that Azoulay felt were necessary to provide context. These traced drawings, titled *Unshowable Photographs*, reject the archive's power to control how violence is presented and studied.³⁷ ³⁸ Instead of treating photographs as scholarly evidence to analyse, Azoulay picks up pens, scissors, and tape to dismantle their authority or, in her words, "to break the spell of the photographic document".³⁹

³⁷ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 371–374.

³⁸ Sabrina Alli, 'Ariella Aïsha Azoulay: "It Is Not Possible to Decolonize the Museum without Decolonizing the World."', *Guernica Mag*, 3 December 2020, <https://www.guernicamag.com/miscellaneous-files-ariella-aisha-azoulay/>.

³⁹ Ibid.

Azoulay's understanding of potential history is rooted in her engagement with photographic archives. "My understanding of potential history", she writes, "emerged from my work creating archives against existing ones, but also stimulated it" (p. 367). Archives are not neutral repositories but active agents of imperialist control, where objects and images are severed from their relational and historical contexts. For Azoulay, reclaiming photographs from archival structures and reintegrating them into their historical and social networks becomes a political act of care and repair. Azoulay illustrates this in the book with her investigation of *untaken photographs* of mass rapes committed by the Allied forces in Berlin during World War II. For Azoulay, a photograph of the rubble or a destroyed building in Berlin from that time is also a photograph of the mass rapes. This can only be seen by keeping open the shutter and looking beyond what is directly visible in these WWII photographs, taking into account anonymous testimonies and word-of-mouth of German women from the time.^{40 41} 'What is recorded in photographs is always more than what was intended', Azoulay writes, citing Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, 'even though this more can be kept "visibly invisible."' ⁴²

3.3. Potential histories of art and the commons

Azoulay challenges the often romanticised notion of the commons, arguing that what we share in common is not always inherently positive. In the section *Our Violent Commons* (pp. 148-153), she emphasises that violence, both historical and ongoing, frequently constitutes the very foundation of the commons. This violence is evident in the shared legacies of imperialism, colonialism, and exploitation that underpin many of the institutions and traditions associated with the commons. Rather than assuming that the commons represent equitable or harmonious spaces, Azoulay calls for a critical interrogation of what is actually held in common and the processes through which those shared elements were created. One stark example of violent commons is the museum, particularly those in European and imperialist contexts that house vast collections of stolen objects labeled as "art." These objects, extracted from colonised territories under

⁴⁰ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 236–248.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 370–374.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 235–236.

the guise of imperial conquest were decontextualised, reclassified as unique artefacts, and incorporated into a narrative of national culture and history. Over time, these museums have been framed as repositories of public heritage, fostering a shared sense of identity and pride among the citizens of imperialist nations. Azoulay critiques this interpretation of the commons, highlighting how the violent acts of theft, looting, and displacement have been obscured by the legitimising frameworks of “art” and “public heritage.”

In the section *Art destroys the common world* (pp. 100–104) and *The Rise of the Imperial Persona of the Artist* (pp. 105–112), Azoulay critiques the imperial role of the artist as a persona. The act of transforming objects into “art”—a process that recontextualises cultural artefacts and frames them as singular, valuable, and separate from their origins—is a key mechanism of imperial violence. Artists and curators often participate in this process by perpetuating the imperialist classification of objects and by creating narratives that reinforce the dominance of the imperial center. In this way, art not only destroys the relational networks that once connected these objects to their original communities but also helps construct an imperial commons rooted in violence and dispossession.

Azoulay’s concept of potential history offers a way to transform the violent foundations of the commons into practices of care by rewinding. Instead of perpetuating the violence inherent in the commons as they currently exist, potential history seeks to reimagine the commons as spaces of collective responsibility and relationality. “Imagined, claimed, and enacted simultaneously by all those who are implicated in imperial violence”, Azoulay explains, “victims and perpetrators alike as cocitizens, potential history is the transformation of violence into shared care for our common world.”⁴³

3.4. Being with others across time: a potential history of (un)belonging and incommensurable experiences

⁴³ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 56–57.

At its core, Ariella Azoulay's *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* is about challenging the imperialist separation of people, histories, and experiences. One of the most encompassing definitions of potential history appears early in the book: "Potential history is a form of being with others, both living and dead, across time, against the separation of the past from the present, colonized peoples from their worlds and possessions, and history from politics" (pp. 43-45). This definition underscores the central ethos of potential history, to imagine and enact ways of being together that transcend the divisions imposed by imperialist frameworks. To "be with others" is to reject the imperialist logic that separates people into categories of belonging and unbelonging, past and present, alive and dead. Azoulay emphasises that these separations are not real, they are constructs of imperialism that fracture human relationships and experiences. Instead, potential history calls for a collective realisation that we are already interconnected. By fostering societies based on mutual care rather than violence, we can dismantle the frameworks that perpetuate these divisions. Azoulay's approach suggests that this transformation requires not the invention of new systems but the recognition of what already exists: our shared existence and capacity for care.

Throughout *Potential History*, Azoulay interrogates the concepts of belonging and unbelonging. Belonging, under imperialist conditions, is often constructed through exclusion and erasure. Imperialist systems create hierarchies of belonging, determining who is considered part of the "citizenship" and who is excluded or rendered invisible. This process is deeply tied to the violence of imperial archives, museums, and narratives, which sever people and objects from their original contexts and reframe them to serve the needs of the imperial center.⁴⁴

Unbelonging, then, becomes a condition imposed on those who are marginalised, colonised, or otherwise excluded from these constructed hierarchies. But unbelonging is not simply the absence of belonging; it can also be a site of resistance and potential. By engaging with incommensurable experiences, ways of existing outside of the imperial norm, *Potential History* seeks to create spaces where differences are not erased or

⁴⁴ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 359-362; 477.

subsumed but are instead recognised as essential to the collective.⁴⁵ This approach challenges the teleological narratives of imperialism, which frame history as a linear progression toward domination, and instead opens up possibilities for imagining alternatives grounded in the coexistence of diverse experiences and perspectives.

4. Unlearning with companions: Refusing imperialist epistemologies with artistic research

Unlearning with companions means challenging the way we've been taught to learn about the world and study it: by relying on political concepts and categories, like good guys and bad guys, focusing only on the works of well-known philosophers, or following the writings of politicians stored in imperial archives. Instead, it calls for moving away from the perspectives of imperial authorities, like imperial scholars and museums, and exploring other ways people share the world. This involves paying attention to acts of resistance, public expressions, diverse voices, and suppressed dreams that have been overlooked or silenced.⁴⁶

Ariella Azoulay's concept of non-imperial epistemologies (she also calls this non-imperial grammar) is tied to her critique of the imperial archive and the processes through which knowledge is produced and categorised. Non-imperial grammar can be expressed in unruliness. What she describes as "unruly objects" can be anything from artefacts, images, and narratives that resist the frameworks of imperial categorisation and refuse to conform to the logic of fragmentation and dispossession.⁴⁷ These will challenge the boundaries imposed by museums, archives, and disciplines, creating space for alternative ways of knowing and being. In *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* she discusses *Scratching on things I could disavow*, an ongoing artistic research project by Walid Raad

⁴⁵ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 359–362; 395–345.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 154–156.

spanning over many years. This work features *unruly objects* that subvert the typical imperialist agenda, embodying Raad's anti-imperialist stance through fabulation.⁴⁸ By altering the expected narrative, Raad creates an unexpected twist, using artefacts that not only resist but actively challenge imperial narratives, highlighting the potential for artistic research projects to disrupt and reinterpret imperial epistemologies. Raad's project is multifaceted, engaging with the rapid development of art infrastructure in the Arab world, particularly in the Gulf states, and exploring how these developments affect cultural and historical perception. Raad's work critically examines the emergence of new cultural institutions and their impact on art and history, questioning the authenticity and origins of "Arab art" as it becomes commodified and integrated into global art markets. His use of archival materials, art objects, and installations invites viewers to reconsider how art and history are presented and consumed, especially in regions undergoing intense cultural and economic transformations due to war and globalisation.^{49 50 51}

4.1. Errata

The same year in which Ariella Azoulay published *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, 2019, she also released the film *Un-documented: Undoing Imperial Plunder*

⁴⁸ Azoulay's discussion of fabulation in her chapter on *unruly objects* inevitably evokes Saidiya Hartman's concept of *critical fabulation*. I have found a useful definition for it on the website of Howlround Theatre Commons, where artistic director Holly L. Derr writes that "[c]ritical fabulation is the combining of historical and archival research with critical theory and fictional narrative to fill in the blanks left in the historical record. It is both a fleshing out and a problematizing of history[...]" However, Azoulay does not explicitly adopt the term *critical fabulation*, which Saidiya Hartman developed specifically in the context of reconstructing the lives of enslaved individuals erased from historical records. Since Hartman's approach is deeply tied to the history of slavery and Black life, Azoulay may refrain from using this term because her work, while engaging with imperial violence and archival erasure, operates within a broader critique of imperial epistemologies rather than focusing specifically on the histories of enslaved people.

⁴⁹ Susan Noyes Platt, 'WALID RAAD SCRATCHING ON THINGS I COULD DISAVOW', 23 February 2016, <https://www.artandpoliticsnow.com/2016/02/walid-raad-scratching-on-things-i-disavow/>.

⁵⁰ Leslie Dick, 'Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World/Part I_Volume 1_Chapter 1 (Beirut: 1992-2005) A Project by Walid Raad', *X-TRA*, accessed 1 April 2025, <https://www.x-traonline.org/article/a-project-by-walid-raad/>.

⁵¹ 'Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World, Part I _ Volume 1 _ Chapter 1: Beirut', *Fondazione Antonio Ratti* (blog), 3 July 2009, <https://fondazioneratti.org/projects/scratching-on-things-i-could-disavow-a-history-of-art-in-the-arab-world-part-i-volume-1-chapter-1-beirut-1992-2005>.

and curated the exhibition *Errata* at the Museu Tàpies in Barcelona. All three slightly different iterations of her (artistic) research on potential history. The exhibition was not only curated by Azoulay, it also featured works solely by herself. In *Errata*, objects and documents typically categorised and displayed as discrete artefacts are recontextualised to emphasise their relational and political dimensions. The exhibition sought to interrupt the conventional logic of the archive by refusing to separate the objects from their histories of extraction, violence, and dispossession. Instead, Azoulay's curatorial choices invited viewers to engage with these objects as participants in ongoing histories, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and care.⁵²



Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Errata* at Museu Tàpies, Barcelona 2019, Copyright Silke Briel/HKW

Errata resists imperial epistemologies by questioning and intervening in the imperial grammar of photographic archives and the authoritative status of books and documents. By employing techniques like erasure, replacement, juxtaposition, addition, and subtraction, Azoulay disrupts the "untouchable status" of historical objects, thus

⁵² 'Ariella Aïsha Azoulay. *Errata*', *Museu Tàpies* (website), 11 October 2019, <https://museutapiés.org/en/exposicio/ariella-aisha-azoulay-errata/>.

undermining the traditional methods through which imperial knowledge is preserved and communicated. This act of resistance opens up spaces for alternative narratives and readings that challenge imperial histories.⁵³

The exhibition showed eight projects, like *Natural History of Rape*, the contents of which were more or less also in the book and her film *Un-Documented: Undoing Imperial Plunder*. These projects challenge imperial narratives by intersecting the treatment of objects (more specifically, photographs and artefacts) and people. These interventions highlight the discrepancies between historical documentation and its imperial use, advocating for a more inclusive recognition of histories and rights.

A key challenge highlighted in *Errata* is the entrenched authority of archival and documentary practices that perpetuate imperial legacies. Azoulay's approach, which blends critical theory with artistic practice, directly confronts these practices but also faces the challenge of being recognised and understood within the conventional frameworks of art and history. The potential incongruence here involves the difficulty in balancing critical disruption with the necessity of engaging with established institutions and audiences that may be resistant or unresponsive to such radical rethinking.

Ariella Azoulay's curatorial practice operates as an extension of her theoretical and scholarly work, treating exhibitions not as showcases of art objects, but as sites for engaging with larger questions of history, memory, and epistemology. Her approach reframes the curator's role: instead of a gatekeeper who selects and organises materials to fit established narratives, Azoulay employs curatorial decisions as a means of unlearning the imperialist structures embedded in traditional archives and art collections. This involves challenging the separation between object and context. By presenting archival materials and documents in ways that emphasise their relational and political dimensions, she disrupts the conventional museum logic and invites viewers to reconsider their role in the historical narratives these materials uphold. In terms of artistic research, Azoulay's

⁵³ 'Ariella Aïsha Azoulay. *Errata*', *Museu Tàpies* (website), 11 October 2019, <https://museutapiés.org/en/exposicio/ariella-aisha-azoulay-errata/>.

method diverges from a straightforward academic analysis or a purely artistic production. Rather, her research integrates critical theory, historical inquiry, and visual culture. She employs *non-imperial grammar* to interrogate and reconfigure the relationships between the past, present, and future. This allows her to explore not only what the archive contains, but also what it excludes or obscures. In this sense, her artistic research is as much about the process of questioning and reimagining as it is about producing tangible outcomes.

4.2. Theresa Weber's *Alle Menschen Werden Brüder*

Theresa Weber is a contemporary artist who works with textiles, sculpture, performance and multimedia. Her practice focuses on the intersections of material culture, identity, and memory. Central to her work is the questioning of existing power hierarchies and fixed categorisations.⁵⁴ Weber often uses repurposed materials, transforming them into complex, layered compositions that challenge perceptions of value and tradition.

Theresa Weber's exhibition, *Alle Menschen werden Brüder* ("All Men Shall Be Brothers"), was a thought-provoking showcase hosted at Neun Kelche in Berlin in 2024. The exhibition title, inspired by Friedrich Schiller's text in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, examines themes of unity, human connection, and cultural diversity through a contemporary lens. Weber's artistic research project integrates various media, including woven fabrics, prints, and installations, to explore the interplay between cultural identities and shared humanity. Her installations include intricate pieces with fabrics, beads, acrylic pastes, and mosaic stones, emphasising tactile and sensory engagement. A central element of the exhibition is the Beethoven Wall, a large-scale wallpaper installation, which alludes to the density of forests as a metaphor for interconnectedness and resilience.⁵⁵

During an interview that we had in November, Weber told me that her *Beethoven series*, in which she has been working with an archival photograph of Beethoven's death

⁵⁴ Theresa Weber, ChertLüdde (website), 14 September 2024, <https://chertluedde.com/theresa-weber/>.

⁵⁵ Kira Dell and Laura Seidel, 'Theresa Weber ALLE MENSCHEN WERDEN BRÜDER', *Kuba Paris* (blog), 2024, <https://kubaparis.com/submission/455286>.

mask since 2022, strongly aligns with the ideas explored in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. This series in particular clearly positions itself as being against the separation of dead and alive, past and present and official history and speculation. I interpret her engagement with Beethoven's death mask as the use of non-imperial grammar in the form of an *unruly object*—an artefact that, when reinterpreted, challenges and disrupts imperialist narratives.



Theresa Weber, *Alle Menschen werden Brüder* at Neun Kelche, Berlin 2024, Copyright Joanna Wilk

Theresa Weber's exhibition builds on themes of interconnectedness and shared humanity, directly resonating with Azoulay's concept of potential history. By engaging with the archival image of Beethoven's death mask, Weber critiques the rigid frameworks of imperialist historiography. She recontextualises the death mask as a bridge between past and present, challenging the conventional separation of the living and the dead, a fundamental concern in Azoulay's work. In repeating the image over and over in a huge wall-based installation, she implores us to *see* the potential. The potential that perhaps Beethoven was not white. Perhaps he was like her, a hybrid person, on the intersection between Caribbean and German heritage and culture.

Through her series, Weber not only questions the separation between the living and the dead but also the conventional racial narratives associated with historical figures. By speculating that Beethoven might not have been white and presenting this possibility through the repetition of his death mask, Weber's artistic research project disrupts the traditional portrayal and perceived identity of historical figures. This approach aligns with Azoulay's theory by insisting on the fluidity of historical narratives and the refusal to accept history as a series of fixed and immutable truths.

Weber's reinterpretation of the death mask as a hybrid symbol, bridging Caribbean and German heritage, serves as a potent example of unlearning imperial epistemologies in artistic research. It undermines the homogeneity often imposed by imperial narratives and replaces it with a more open, pluralistic view of history. This recontextualisation not only challenges the viewer's understanding of Beethoven but also broadens the discussion about the intersectionality of race, history, and identity.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has examined Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, exploring her onto-epistemological framework and highlighting two artistic research projects where this framework is enacted. By analysing Azoulay's exhibition *Errata* and Theresa Weber's *Alle Menschen werden Brüder*, the essay demonstrated that artistic research, with its open-ended and speculative research methodologies, provides a valuable space for experimenting with alternative ways of knowing and being.

Azoulay's *Potential History* fundamentally challenges imperialist historical practices that separate and isolate people, objects, and contexts, highlighting instead relationality and interconnectedness. Through her curatorial approach in *Errata*, Azoulay explicitly disrupts imperial logics of categorisation, archival documentation, and the presumed neutrality of photography. Her work positions curatorial practice as a form of critical and

speculative artistic enquiry that foregrounds rehearsal, reversal, and repair, embodying an active refusal to accept imperialist frameworks as inevitable or neutral.

Theresa Weber's exhibition further enriches this exploration by confronting imperial histories and concepts of belonging, hybridity, and archival representation through artistic methods. Weber employs speculative, poetic, and auto-ethnographic strategies to explore questions of identity and belonging. Her exhibition interrogates historical narratives shaped by imperialism, by opening up a different potential, and in doing that, she highlights the complexities of hybridity and the nature of belonging. By doing so, Weber's artistic practice challenges traditional, imperialist epistemologies relating to identity and history, engaging with the concept of potential history through a deeply personal yet collectively resonant artistic lens.

Writing this text has deepened my understanding of potential history as a framework for artistic research and has significantly influenced the current development of my graduation project. While this project is central to the completion of my MFA studies, my engagement with these themes extends beyond the limits of the program. The exploration of Azoulay and Weber's work has reinforced my commitment to continue this enquiry, as it highlights how artistic research, through its critical and imaginative methodologies in enquiry and knowledge creation, can meaningfully challenge and reshape imperial epistemologies.

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