

CONFLICT ZONES

ACTIVIST STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY
CURATORIAL PRACTICES

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EDUCATING/CURATING/MANAGING

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INTRODUCTION

Almost a year ago activists, curators, citizens, students and other actors of the Hungarian contemporary art scene occupied the stairs of the Ludwig Museum - Museum of Contemporary Art in Budapest. The action's cause was the controversial selection of the museum's new director, the strong political influence on the whole procedure that lacked transparency and in general the expression of being anxious that the authoritarian state power is delimiting the autonomous art scene.



SOURCE: ASSOCIATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ART (FACEBOOK PAGE)

It is evident, that the cultural field always depended on the state: in Hungary all the museums are state funded, in addition, the private, the business or the civil spheres do not have their roots in supporting cultural or art projects, and the cooperation between these alternative publics are just developing as a good side effect of the rising hegemonial cultural politics.

The strong influence of the state might be explained with the ideology of the current, conservative, right wing leadership of the country aiming at concentrating power, and for this purpose, culture and education seem to be adequate instruments. The interest of the Hungarian state is to support representative institutions, neglecting somehow professional principles. A very typical example for this power concentrating gesture is the case of the Museum of Fine Arts, which became a giant museum complexity as it was affiliated with the Hungarian National Gallery, without noticing the consequences and actual disadvantages of this merger. Another distressing process of centralisation in the cultural field is the establishment of the Hungarian Art Academy, an organisation that gathers artists from an elder generation, who are at the same time, outspokenly sympathising with the current political system in return for a monthly paid, perpetual wage.¹ The Hungarian Art Academy was integrated in the constitution in 2011 as well, that means, that the Academy is now an organic part of cultural decision-making. As a first step the Kunsthalle, which was an important exhibition space for contemporary art in Budapest, and used to be a significant part of the institutional framework of contemporary art, was given to the Academy



POLICEMAN AND PROTESTERS HOLDING A MOLINO WITH SUBTITLES "TRANSPARENT PUBLIC SPHERE NOW! TRANSPARENCY IN CULTURAL DECISIONS!" IN FRONT OF THE LUDWIG MUSEUM - MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, BUDAPEST, SOURCE: ASSOCIATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ART (FACEBOOK PAGE)

¹ A short history of MMA: <http://nemmanoblogs.org/2012/12/07/a-short-history-of-mma/>

as a present², after its leader criticised the international exhibition programme of the Kunsthalle, and expressed his claim on salon exhibitions which represent the national values of art. The conservative and often nationalistic cultural policy has its impacts on other fields of contemporary culture: independent theatre companies getting even less financial support³; a state secretary of the cultural ministry recently judged the educational methodologies of the Academy of Theatre and Film, because he declared that the institution does not follow Christian principles⁴; and the situation of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts was also critical last year, as it almost had to close its doors due to financial difficulties.

The trigger of the small occupy movement on the stairs of Ludwig Museum last year was the directorial competition of the one and only significant contemporary art museum in Budapest. Although, the systematic destruction of autonomous initiatives and the intervention into the function of valuable institutions of art generated dissatisfaction among those cultural actors who demanded a transparent and democratic institutional system.

The recent philosophy behind cultural politics is more than a harmful ideology, on one hand, it follows an extreme conservative path. In this sense, traditional institutions of culture are representing only material needs such as financial resource, an estate with a high value and powerful position. On the other hand a hidden nationalism is evolving behind the state governed vision on culture. This notion deprives culture from its significant function, and models art as an illustration or background music for a visionary,



SOURCE: ASSOCIATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ART (FACEBOOK PAGE)

"THE ART OF NOT BEING GOVERNED QUITE SO MUCH"

glorious state that attempts to convince people about its power and efficiency. In my opinion, this dangerous tendency made critical thinking a kernel of radical cultural practices, which are querying the sustainability of the current institutional system and are involved both socially and politically, and stand out against a suppressing, narrow minded, governed cultural policy. According to Michel Foucault, critique is "the art of not being governed quite so much"⁵. Foucault also asserts that "critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects on power and question power on its

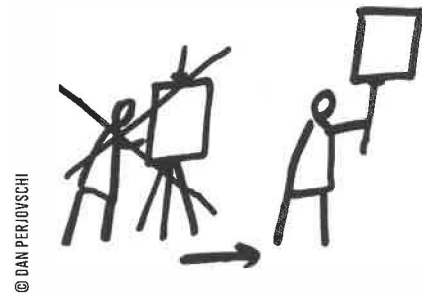
² Julia Michalska: Power of Hungary's conservative art Academy grows. <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Power-of-Hungarys-conservative-art-Academy-grows/28280>

³ George Szirtes: Hungary's culture is being crushed or co-opted, The Guardian, 6. August, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/06/hungary-culture-crushed>

⁴ Imre Kerényi, a personal representative of the prime minister made his statement at the Christian Theatrical Festival on the 22th of May, 2014. "Eighty percent of European art, and I think eighty percent of Hungarian drama, is the product of Christian culture [...]" "Europe is the triumph of Christian thinking, and so is Hungary. The problem across the world is that an 'ism' has taken over the main power in the education of directors and playreaders, which says no to all this, and this establishes a viewpoint where decadence and corruption predominate." Fruzsina Wilhelm: Anti gay remarks by PM's man go unpunished, The Budapest Times, 13.June 2014. <http://budapesttimes.hu/2014/06/13/anti-gay-remarks-by-pms-man-go-unpunished/>

⁵ Foucault, Michel: The politics of truth, 1997, p. 45

discourses of truth.”⁶ Critique as a reflective process is an appropriate instrument to create a discursive space, “a certain way of thinking, speaking and acting, a certain relationship to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, a relationship to society, to culture and also a relationship to others we could call a critical attitude.”⁷



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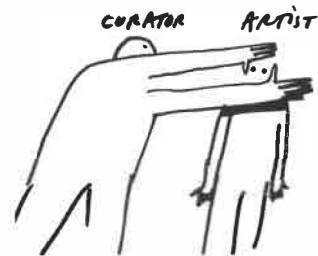
The idea of dismantling power relations through knowledge and critical processes can be interpreted as a metaphor of my further analysis on indirect activism in curatorial and artistic practices, that are at the same time, forms of knowledge production as well.

Shortly returning to the point of departure, the Ludwig Stairs protest had several goals to reach, the most important was to initiate a pro-

fessional conversation between the representatives of the government and the actual participants of contemporary art and culture. After more than a week strategically organised, day and night presence, the demonstration ended with the exodus of the protesters. Although none of their demands have been accepted, something changed radically in the Hungarian art scene. This change is not just about the realignment (or collapse) of the institutional system, but rather about taking the first step towards collective thinking and acting. The action called Ludwig Stairs was an unconventional fusion of a living exhibition, curatorial practice and activism, and symbolised the leaving of the ivory tower at the same time. “The art world is notoriously self-focused, and history has shown, that artist in any numbers can be hustled out of the ivory tower and into the street (or even into poster making) only when things get dramatically bad.”⁸ - as stated by Lucy Lippard.

Even such a small art world like the Hungarian can function as an island for intellectuals, but the Ludwig Stairs protest underlined, that politics and art are bound together, and that the curatorial approach can transform to a social and political action at a certain point, not to mention the engagement of the participants, who escalated publicity and applied civil disobedience without any kind of violence.

As an employee of the museum I was not permitted to take part in the demonstration, but, avoiding the dramatic or personal turns of the story, walking along the protesters every day made me think over the possibilities of institutional curating and more general, the role of the curator in such critical situations. There is a lot of words written and told about institutional critique, less about the artist with an activist intention, but there is just a few about the activist potential of curating, although, the role of the curator shifted radically as the profession broke through the walls of museums and went beyond making exhibitions. Since the second half of the 1990s the role of the curator



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6 Foucault, Michel: The Politics of Truth, 1997, p. 47.

7 Foucault, Michel: The Politics of Truth, 1997, p. 42.

8 Lippard, Lucy: Get the Message. A decade of Art for Social Change, 1984, p. 26.

transformed, and curating itself became popular as well: a number of official university courses, unregistered short term trainings, online seminars are existing today, offering to educate curators, but most of them have a vague imagination about the shifting paradigm of the profession.⁹ It is yet undefined if the current rise of the curatorial education is a trend, or can be interpreted as another side effect of capitalism, where knowledge is sold just like other goods in the supermarket. However, curating became attractive, that fact also urges to reconsider the role of a traditionally museum related profession and its responsibility today.

In order to avoid provincial thinking, I decided not to write about the current Hungarian situation, rather, I would use it as a point of departure to examine critical curatorial practices, which are combining an indirect activism by mediating certain thematics to a broader public. Another observation also inspired me to investigate the international art context: the institution related thinking is already exceeded by many curatorial and artistic projects, which have started a new dialogue about alternative methodologies of curating.

"ART PRODUCES SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE, ART CAN BE SAID TO BE AN OPEN UNIVERSITY OF KNOWLEDGE"

This bunch of impressions prompted me to start a research finding coherence between the curatorial function and some kind of other knowledge which comes from the exact *doing* of things. According to Claire Bishop's definition, the motivation of the activist attitude comes from three important resources: the need for creating broader communities with close relations between the members, in order to strengthen social responsibility; the investment of the subject to be able to relate to its social and political environment; and the desire of introducing a more democratic authorship, where collectivity is taken into consideration.¹⁰ This also means a desire for the deconstruction of the existing hierarchy, which is a key aspect of activism, as hierarchy has always been an ancient form of power. Turning against hegemony should be a strong curatorial statement as well, especially because activism does

not happen without the edge of a radical critique, and without considering the critic's ancient function, “the responsibility to know knowledge”.¹¹

As a hypothesis I would state, that in the curatorial practice activism can manifest in an abstract manner, by juxtaposing various knowledges and combining them in order to create publicity and a democratic space where conflicts have the chance to be discussed. In this master thesis I investigate the activist potential of curating via diverse models. Projects with institutional or artistic background explain an expanded concept of cultural activism and alternatives of curatorial work. My basic intention is to show that activism is ordered around two certain aspects: creating communities and placing an issue to the foreground with a transformative intention, that leads towards a generative conclusion. By using the words of Artur Zmijewski, “art produces social knowledge,

9 Alice Pfeiffer: Who Wants to be a Curator?, The New York Times, 10.10.2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/11/arts/11iht-rartcurating11.html?_r=0

10 Bishop, Claire: The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents in: Artforum 44, No. 6, 2006

11 Foucault, Michel: The Politics of Truth, 1997, p. 48.

art can be said to be an open university of knowledge”¹², I would like to underline that mediating this universal knowledge is a substantial curatorial task.

The structure of my essay will follow a collection of examples that all have a distinct case in their focus: from my perspective it became particularly important to review curatorial practices which contain a kind of activist attitude in order to rethink the alternative ways of curatorial practice, and eventually, to gain inspiration for my future work. My point of departure is going to be a general analysis of the concept of the ‘curatorial’, with an intention to present the transformation of the curatorial role. Through a historical perspective I will examine the emergence of participatory art and the social turn in art in the 1990s and its consequences in contemporary art and curatorial practice. I make an attempt to reveal the conflict zones of curatorial practice. I quest for a kind of unruly curatorial activity, within socio-political questions are framed with an activist approach.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: CURATING, THE CURATORIAL AND THE PUBLIC

The curatorial as concept is used since the 1990s, when the exhibition space began to transform into a field of curatorial critique. The term itself assumes a special methodology of curatorial practice¹³, which means no longer just displaying artworks, but a long-term, educational, discursive, research based process as well. A new vocabulary of the curatorial profession was claimed, that orders the different forms of curatorial activity around fresh ways of interpretations, and gives a content to these understandings, instead of the many abandoned expressions such as the institution, the curator or the audience.

An interpretative language was put in context, in order to depict, that the “*object of contemporary curating is much larger than contemporary art*”¹⁴: curating is more like a tool for mapping knowledge, therefore, the object of curating is moving in a wide scale. This multiplicity includes abstract concepts such as artistic research, which was the topic of the dOCUMENTA(13) in 2012, or encyclopedic knowledge in general, which was thematised by the 55th Venice Biennial in 2013, just to mention two well known exhibitions from the past few years. Curators work simultaneously in several modalities:

12 Artur Zmijewski: Applied Social Arts, 2012

13 Eszter Szakács: Curatorial. in: Curatorial Dictionary, 2013

14 Smith, Terry: What is contemporary curatorial thought?, p. 29.

in an *expanding field*¹⁵, where they gained a new, powerful form of authorship that can be correlated with the increasing amount of knowledge produced in all areas of science.

In the following paragraphs, in order to look behind the process of mapping knowledge, I would like to present some theoretical and curatorial approaches which are investigating the possibility of creating a new public, and which are rethinking the conditions of curating as well.

Irit Rogoff is a theorist, curator and head of the Phd programme for already practicing curators, called curatorial/knowledge at the Goldsmith University in London. The academic course has a special accent on bringing together theoretical research and the experiences of working in art institutions, and declares curatorial research as its main task. The curriculum was conceptualised to explore the possibilities of an emerging discourse and to define alternative curatorial activities. In addition, considerable attention is paid on activism and engagement, on the actualisation of politics and on performative practices as well. By establishing the structure of this doctoral programme, Irit Rogoff actively took part in redefining the curatorial function, and its access to politics.

As she explains, “*curating is a professional practice, which involves a set of skills and practices, institutional and infrastructural conditions.*”¹⁶ In her point of view, curating is rather about presentation, based on institutional thinking, however, the curatorial assumes an active work, not an isolated end product. The curatorial attitude moved away from representing, and discovered a dynamic field which has many potentials to intervene into the instrumentalized relation to knowledge. Rogoff describes the curatorial as an epistemic structure, that puts together various knowledges and creates a public platform, an access for people to take part in this creative and reflective process, therefore, curatorial methods can function as interfaces of certain contents. Knowledge is a part of life, the question is more how this information is being processed. Although curatorial thinking is much more linked to the intellectual content it produces, the focus should stay on art itself. Maria Lind, Swedish curator shared her impression about the vanishing artworks in the sea of intellectual statements and proposed to return to art itself. “*Not that art disappeared completely, but it has been pushed into the background*”¹⁷ - stated Lind, inviting us to turn back to art, and to review the conditions of production both art and curating.

On the other hand, she also highlights taking the risk is the stake of criticality, which meant to be “*a way of thinking in terms of interconnections: linking object, images, processes, people, locations and discourses in physical space like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns and tensions. This is a curatorial approach that owes much to site-specific practices and even more to context sensitive work and various traditions of institutional critique.*”¹⁸ The essence of these generating twists and the active catalyst is what makes a distinction, in my opinion, between a curatorial practice that of being representation oriented and the one that is more mediative or interpretative. Contextualising different territories of knowledge production is a specific moment of the curatorial, what Jean

15 Rogoff, Irit: ‘Smuggling’ An Embodied Criticality, 2006. http://www.curatorial.net/resources/Rogoff_Smuggling.pdf

16 von Bismarck, Beatrice, Schaffaff, Jörn, Weski, Thomas (eds.): Cultures of The Curatorial, p. 23.

17 Lind, Maria & Hoffmann, Jens: To Show or Not to Show in: Mousse Magazine, Issue #31

18 Maria Lind: The Curatorial, p. 63.

Paul Martinon describes as a *disruptive activity against received knowledge*.¹⁹

As above I tried to sketch how knowledge is being handled by curatorial methodologies, but the question of publicity is still opened. The issue of the public – both cultural and political – is a key element of my topic in which I search for the intersections of curatorial and activist practice.

Some terms are so often used that we connect them with certain connotations, and have the im-

pression that there are no words we understand better, even the term has the most various and complex meaning, until we read it in a specific context, this former connotation suddenly vanishes. Public is forme one of these expressions, for this reason I will firstly examine the concept, its possible meanings and also its place in a curatorial discourse.

Although the development of the public is a key element of modernity, the noun is frequently mixed in ordinary usage: there must be a difference between a public and the public, which means a sort of social totality, the people in general who are organised by the nation, the state, the city, or other communities, such as religion or even a political point of view. On the other hand, a public means a more concrete audience, a group of people at the same event or in the same physical space. A riot, a crowd or a party are also forms of the public, with a bit more blurred boundaries as in the case of a theatrical situation, but in these contexts the public still recognises itself, and is able to initiate a common action. Sometimes the public forms an abstract shape, a theoretical or imaginary form, but this hidden feature also allows the public to organise itself without institutions, law, or administration, therefore the public can exist outside state regulations or social requirements. This magic aspect makes the public so important and attractive in different senses: the public is a value for politics and for art as well, because it can be addressed in a discourse. *“Speaking, writing, and thinking involve us –actively and immediately – in a public, and thus in the being of the sovereign.”*²⁰ - as Michael Warner states in his essay entitled *Publics and Counterpublics*. This moment of being involved in a public is a crucial effect of curatorial practice, an aspect that was discovered already before the evolution of modernity, and was consciously applied also in the museological context.

In order to understand public participation, we have to consider a more historical perspective: the production of a new public was a general ideal of the Enlightenment. The intellectual, political and social movement was motivated by a notion of establishing a new bourgeois subject of reason in the 19th century Europe. Opening collections and organising exhibitions in salons for a specific audience were cultural gestures in order to create a desired bourgeois public, and through that, a new nation state was also imagined. Simon Sheikh explained this new narrative of power-knowledge relation with the special behaviour that is still required in most of the museums: *slow-paced walking, lowered speech, no physical contact with the objects on display, general discretion. In fact, representation of your values and histories goes hand in hand with proper behaviour – relations of power and knowledge become internalised through behaviour*

19 Jean Paul Martinon: *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, 2013, p.26.

20 Michael Warner: *Publics and Counterpublics*, 2005, p.69.

A RIOT, A CROWD OR A PARTY ARE FORMS OF THE PUBLIC AS WELL

*and empowerment: self-regulation and self-representation.*²¹

The case of cultural representation – that was typical for the 19th century – conditioned exhibition making methods as well: the representative space of the museum constructed a specific subject, not just on an individual level, but also on a public one. A double representation plays a significant role in creating that certain public, because at once the narrations, the displayed artworks and also the spectators are being represented. This imaginary medium of the public has real effects: *“an audience, a community, a group, an adversary, or a constituency is imagining, and imagined through a specific mode of address that is supposed to produce, actualize or even activate this imagined entity, ‘the public.’”*²² - as Sheikh argues, and at the same time, he asserts that the responsibility of exhibition making is to use this power appropriately, the power of the public, that means both a cultural and a political entity.

The bourgeois nature of the art institutions was often condemned because of its neutralising effect on critical forms through curatorial or exhibitionary methods, although, exhibition spaces during the bourgeois revolutions functioned as public spaces, as social spheres for cultivated discussions, therefore, the museum and the gallery space always had their political significance. But who is being represented today, how can we follow the development of this bourgeois self-authorization and its effect on contemporary curatorial praxis and institutional policies? What remained from transforming spaces of art into places of cultural and national representation? These questions could be answered by investigating who, from which position and for what audience is speaking today in between the hierarchic framework of exhibitions and institutions. At this point, I would like to make a slight outlook on the culture of biennials, because the increase of this type of exhibitions spectacularly changed the public of contemporary art, and turned curatorial practice towards a transnational, moreover, to a politically engaged direction, that we should not leave out of consideration.

In the last two decades the biennial became a dominant model of exhibition making across the world. Among these regularly organised international group shows there are ones with traditions, such as the Venice Biennial, first held in 1895, or the documenta, which was established in 1955 as an attempt to repress the tragic heritage of the Nazi Germany, but most of them such as the Sao Paulo, Havana, or Asian Biennial are younger phenomenons of the global art world.

According to the *Contemporary* magazine's special issue on curatorship, which provided a comprehensive list, eighty official biennial exhibitions have been held between 2005 and 2006, which is more than interesting in the context of a global public: the often mentioned cliché, that contemporary art is marginal without a significant publicity is not relevant anymore.

The culture of biennials provided a new interpretation of contemporary art for a more transnational public, that includes partly the art professionals, but also a broader audience. The problematic aspect of these exhibitions is that they create imaginary spaces for the representation of contemporary art: biennial's transform places from be-

21 Steven Sheikh: *Constitutive effects: the techniques of the Curatorial*, in: *Curating Subjects*, p. 177.

22 Steven Sheikh: *Constitutive effects: the techniques of the Curatorial*, in: *Curating Subjects*, p. 178.

ing everyday settings into temporary environments that contribute to the production, processing and consumption of international contemporary art, concentrated in a particular time and place. Biennial curators have to face high expectations: they have to be innovative with a concept of the exhibition and curatorial approach never invented before. Not just the city where the exhibition is located will be a tourist attraction, but also the curatorial concept and a certain ideology is getting a spotlight. Another query is the controversial and very colonising point of view, which seeks exotic, new materials that underline the cross-cultural exchange, but without a reflection on local context or audience.

Biennials are machineries, which on one hand serve out the interests of dealers, sponsors, or collectors, and on the other, they define what is 'contemporary' by reinventing themselves time and again. Under these circumstances, the figure of the curator became a transcultural mediator, who employs non-Western forms of art. As Paul O'Neill ponders on this shifting role, "*on one hand, the curatorial gesture could be seen as opening up a radical prospect, through an acknowledgement of the lack of visibility of otherness, on the other hand, it could be seen as ultimately reifying certain power relations, by failing to articulate a political context that would make more meaningful the various forms of otherness alluded to within the exhibition.*"²³ What would then be the ideal form of handling a political context? This issue also reveals the alliances between publicity and the curatorial function, furthermore, raises the topic how a certain political content can be elaborated within an exhibition, using curatorial techniques, and by doing so, what are the possible strategies of activating artistic approaches.

MUSEUMS AND EXHIBITIONS AS POLITICAL SPACES

In this chapter I would like to propose a theoretical interpretation of the political perspectives of art and the curatorial function. Presumably, this attempt will make visible the conflict zones where the intellectual approach of the curator has the chance to pass into a knowledge transferring, activist practice.

In order to understand better the concept of the curatorial function, I would like to refer to Oliver Marchart's theory that connects the public nature of curating with its collectiveness. Marchart underlines his statement, that *the curatorial function lies in the organisation of the public sphere*²⁴, whereby he also distinguishes a public, and the

23 O'Neill: Biennial Culture and the Emergence of a Global Curatorial Discourse: Curating in the Context of Biennials and Large Scale Exhibitions, p. 57.

24 Marchart, Oliver: The Curatorial Function, p. 43.

public, their differences I expounded already above.

The exhibition space is said to be a public space, just because it is open to public, but accessibility in general is not the certain quality that makes a space public, as we learn from Marchart. However, he asserts, an escalation of a debate is needed to break out the numbness of the ones who stand inside the space, which debate *takes place in the medium of conflict*.²⁵ The conflict in this context can be defined by the theory of antagonism: the 'agonistic' idea of democracy (a positive channeling of a political conflict) was originally developed by Chantal Mouffe, whose research seeks to move political conflict from 'antagonism' (discrepancy between enemies) to 'agonism' (struggle between adversaries). The theory is based on a thought that if conflicts cannot take an agonistic form, they are more likely to become antagonistic and pose a danger to the existence and the survival of liberal-democratic societies. Besides her thesis Mouffe states whereas the conflict cannot be fully reconciled, but the model of democracy in terms of 'agonistic pluralism' can help us to face the challenges of democratic politics today, and to get familiar with its conflictual nature as well. Emphasising these conflicts of the current neoliberal political order, that is constantly being queried, and contains many controversies, is one of the essential objects of the curatorial.

But what does the organisational role of the curator mean in its original territory, in the space of the exhibition, while it is transforming to a public sphere, and at the same time, to a political platform, through the medium of conflict? In order to find a relevant answer, Marchart recalls the term of the 'organic intellectual' invented by Antonio Gramsci, who was one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party, and was also renowned for his theoretical contribution to the idea of cultural hegemony.

"CURATOR'S TRUE STANDPOINT IS CONTEXTS OUTSIDE THE FIELD OF ART"

Hegemony, in its literally meaning, denotes an indirect mode of government, a form of imperial dominance, that Gramsci integrated into the theory of cultural hegemony, in which he proposes that one social class can manipulate the moral system and values of a society in order to create a ruling class that justifies the status quo of bourgeois dominance. In the praxis of hegemony, a ruling (hegemon) state dictates the societal character, and also the directions of the internal politics to a subor-

ordinate state, whereby unequal power relations are resulting a threat of force. The organic intellectuals, in Gramsci's viewpoint, are key figures of the organisation of a counter hegemony in everyday life, thereby, he saw their power as the only possible instrument of the proletariat to dissolve the bourgeoisie. Marchart translates the figure of the organic intellectual to the contemporary discourse of the curatorial role, and states, that the "*curator's true standpoint is contexts outside the field of art. They are active organising in social and political contexts beyond the art institution, and they connect them to the field of art.*"²⁶

This idea describes the transformative approach of the curatorial function, the spe-

25 Marchart, Oliver: The Curatorial Function, p. 43.

26 Oliver Marchart, 'The Curatorial Function, Organizing the Ex/position', Curating Critique (eds. Dorothee Richter, Barnaby Drabble), Frankfurt/Main, 2007, pp. 164-170.

cific way of handling different contexts whereby the curator's responsibility is increasing: this is the essence of the stake that curators hold by encroaching conflicts. This should be an explanation for the collectiveness of curatorial practice, because organising a counter hegemony or establishing a political counter standpoint is a very social, yet collective activity. The subject of the curatorial is not an individual entity: the public space requires a declared position to be taken up by the curator, who has the task to elaborate a critical standpoint, in order to open the institution to the political.

Indeed, the combination of art and politics, theory and praxis, analysis and action are the fields where the curatorial function with an activist approach manifests itself. Although, these intersections are not just indicating curatorial methodologies, but also include a particular way of criticising, that Irit Rogoff calls *embodied criticality*. Rogoff depicts a development from criticism through critique to criticality,²⁷ from which progress she deduces how the boundaries have been eroded between theoreticians, historians, critics and artists. This journey had several stations from a traditional discipline, namely, art history; then the next level was critical and theoretical studies with a rather interdisciplinary way of thinking; and we finally arrived to a point where all these merged, that we might call today visual culture.

These three forms of critical approach - criticism, critique and criticality - belong to the different disciplines of interpreting and researching art. For example, art criticism as a genre was typical for times before modernity, and by nature was a rather traditional intellectual activity, with a well respected figure of the critic who judged works of art, and made decisions along certain principles he/she learned at the academy, and by doing so, supposed to have an influence on the constitution of cultural taste. Hence this form of criticism supported the hierarchy between the actors of the art world, presuming that art cannot exist without criticism. Contrary to this, critique has an outsider viewpoint on cultural courses, which is a way of understanding culture as a constantly changing effects, rather than causes that are referring to each other, and also has an accent on exposing hidden folds of structured knowledge. Indeed, criticality is - as we learn from Irit Rogoff - a new phase of cultural theory, that concentrates present conditions and alliances of cultural phenomena, its quest is to point out and actualise the potentials of culture, rather than just listing its faults.

In the past few years, criticality became a slightly battered term of the contemporary art vocabulary as it was used in so many contexts, and was repeated so many times it almost lost its original meaning, which is to learn something new by considering an already existing knowledge, in order to avoid just simply adding new information rather than rethinking a structure.

CRITIQUE WAS A CATALYST OF MODERNITY

I found it particularly important to clear up concepts in this theoretical overview, by analysing the curatorial function, the public space of the curatorial, the political dimension of curatorial practice and the development of criticism in general. This contextualisation might help to envisage the areas where the transformative curatorial practice

27 Irit Rogoff 2003 From Criticism to Critique to Criticality. eipcp. European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies

takes place. It is inevitable to see through the diverse interpretations of critique and its changing connotations or meanings, not just because critique was a catalyst of modernity, but also because querying the status quo is supposed to be a capital of contemporary artistic strategies, except that the curatorial practice is based on a critical and analytical process.



MARCEL BROODTHAERS: MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, DEPARTMENT OF EAGLES, 1968



HANS HAACKE: GERMANIA, 45TH VENICE BIENNIAL, GERMAN PAVILION, 1993

According to critique and its influence, I have to mention another key moment of the transformation of the critical approach which is the emergence of institutional critique as an artistic strategy in the late 1970s. Institutional critique became a dominant wave of artistic production, and was also a catalyst of the tendency began in the 1990s which is called the 'social change in art'. The observation of institutional critique invites us to look behind contemporary artistic practices that see the future of social sustainability in dismantling the boundaries between art and activism, an idea that is not yet been proved itself.²⁸

Originally, institutional critique was a political idea: the bourgeois subjectivity, which was an invention of the Enlightenment, was in close ties with its bureaucratic institutional system that served the function of the nation state, but was also a machinery of repression, classification, and inequality. The Marxist ideology rested on the critique of the bourgeois institutional system, and through the criticism of the bourgeois as an institution, the theory produced the proletariat as a new political subjectivity. In the art sphere, the idea of institutional critique was embedded in the political motivation of questioning the authoritarian role of the cultural institutions, and their self-representative intentions. Also the governmental function of the museum was highlighted in the late 1960s and the early 1970s by the first generation of artists who were concerned with institutional critique.²⁹ They stood against the exclusive situation of cultural institutions, and presented radical challenges to the museum and gallery system. This form of critique prompted them to create a history, a heritage, a patrimony, and altogether a canon.

The focus of the first wave of institutional critique was the discrepancy between the seemingly democratic nation state and the cultural institution that governed itself along hegemonic principles, and not as a representative of parliamen-



ANDREA FRASER: MUSEUM HIGHLIGHTS, 1989. THE PERFORMANCE IN PHILADELPHI MUSEUM OF ART INVOLVED FRASER AS A MUSEUM TOUR GUIDE, WITHIN SHE DESCRIBED THE WORKS OF ART IN AN OVERLY DRAMATISED MANNER, CRITICISING THE ELITE ART INSTITUTE.

28 Eröss, Nikolett: Participation, in: Curatorial Dictionary, 2013

29 Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique, ed. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, MayFly Books, 2009, London



CHRISTIAN PHILIPP MÜLLER: FIXED VALUES, EXHIBITION VIEW, 1991-1992, PALAIS DES BEAUX ARTS, BRUSSELS

tary democracy. The artists, for instance, Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Michel Asher or Robert Smithson were typically related to this tendency of art: their attitude rather sought to have a distance from the institution, which can be interpreted as an attempt of an outsider to disrupt the system. But how can an artist behave as an outsider as a part of an art world that is traditionally institutionalised³⁰?

However, this issue was questioned by the next generation of critically oriented artists while instead of judging the institution, they rather involved in the institution: in the 1990s artistic strategies of institutional critique concentrated on the cultural or symbolic integration of the critique into the institution, and thereby became a critique of representation that pointed out the fragile relationship of the nation state and the cultural institution that was an alliance taken for granted for decades. Artists, as Renee Green, Christian Philipp Müller, Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser were most often cited³¹ while talking about the new tendency of institutional critique.

Their works investigated the complexity of museological representation, observing its alliances to economic power. We can find the roots of this artistic approach in colonial science that treats the 'Other' as an object that has to be presented in a museum. They also added a subjective character to their critique by using feminism and postcolonial historiography which allowed them to rethink power hierarchies through the analysis of the ambivalence and sensibility of representation. In line with questing representation and its techniques, another heritage of the avant-garde movement was recalled: collective working and networked strategies appeared in art, as a result of several social and political changes.

In the early 1990s with the fall of communism, notions of the political and ethical value of the collective were not only associated with authoritarianism and totalitarianism, but were also subjects to a new form of interpretative closure. In addition, the concept of the Left transformed in Western societies and in former soviet countries as well, and manifested rather in the conjuncture of the collective and in not the revolutionary aspect of the ideology, which was linked to a political and aesthetic revolution as a main power of the avant-garde movement. On the other hand, individualism is still conserved in contemporary society, which has concrete indicators such as the protection of property rights, profit making, the right to privacy and individualist consumption,

30 George Dickie describes the artworld as a bundle of systems, such as theater, painting, sculpture, literature etc., each of which shapes an institutional background. These systems are brought under the generic conception of art, and each of the major systems contains further subsystems, that build up the institutional framework. in: Dickie, George: *Art and the aesthetic*, Cornell University Press, 1974, Michigan

31 Ward, Frazer, "The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity", in *October*, Vol. 73, The MIT Press, Summer 1995

to name some of the aspects that show collectivity's utopian, rather idealistic character.

All the same, to make an attempt to embed collectivity in everyday life, collective action and shared ideas started to be interesting new fields for artists, no doubt, this turn also invoked a delicate nostalgic mood of the historical avant-garde movement. By using social situations to produce politically engaged, anti market projects artists renewed the idea of the blurred boundaries between art and life. This classical avantgarde point of view seemed to function well in the postmodern culture, that special paid attention on alienation and dehumanisation of society. The so called "social turn" in art emerged in the early 1990s as a reaction to capitalist production, dominant market imperatives and elitist object based art, and foreshadowed the contemporary situation of art as well.

Exhibitions were not just public spaces, nor spaces of representation anymore, but, recalling the words of Paul O'Neill, "*exhibitions are political tools, ritual places where different identities (artistic, national, subcultural, international, social, rass-specific, regional, global, etc.) are being strengthened.*"³² A political authorship appeared, while the delimited production system of the art world created hierarchy between the actors. Although it is barely acknowledged, that the artistic production and the curatorial practice cannot be divided, it is inevitable that they both use each other's methodology.

Julie Ault, a long term member of the artist collective Group Material enhanced this argument when she described exhibitions as *active contexts*.³³ In her opinion, all the details of making an exhibition are filled with political content. From planning through realisation to reception, curatorial work is built on social processes and is embedded in



GROUP MATERIAL: DEMOCRACY: EDUCATION, 1988, DIA ART FOUNDATION, NYC

social dimensions, emphasising that exhibition making is also a political course. Ault also frequently mentioned cultural activism as an alternative to institutional curating: cultural activism as a discourse has its roots in the United States at the end of the 1960s, especially in the New York art world and settles mainly in the ideologies of the anti-war movement, the feminist emancipation and anti-capitalism. This fact also explains why so many US based references are being used in the essay. Evidently, the Cold War atmosphere of the United States is not comparable with the current Hungarian situation or with contemporary art practices with an activist purpose, but it has a significant effect on the development of social and political engagement connected to art.

The diversity of relational art practices is also seen in the variety of names invented

32 O'Neill, Paul: *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Cultures*, MIT Press, 2012

33 Julie Ault: *The Exhibition as Political space*

for them: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research based or collaborative art. These art practices are not interested in relational aesthetics³⁴, that is more about connecting concepts and objects of art, and in general, building a relationship with the world. They are interested in a collaborative creative process, although, many artists mix their activity inside and outside gallery, such as Francis Alÿs, Pierre Huyghe or Thomas Hirschhorn. Considering the change of the paradigm of contemporary art in the 1990, These artist, rather than positioning themselves in an activist role, in which



THOMAS HIRSCHHORN: BATAILLE MONUMENT, DOCUMENTA 11, 2002

art is declared to be a catalyst of social change, they have a closer relationship to collaborative work, performative and interdisciplinary, research based practices. These alternative art practices use social situations to produce antimarket, politically engaged projects that follow the modernist call of blurring life and art³⁵. Participatory practices have a humanising or de-alienating affect in the conditions of a society that is fragmented by the instrumentality of capitalism. Critics and curators often claim that these practices generated an impeccable value by being "socially relevant": they cannot be unsuccessful, boring or failed works because of their intention of creating social bonds. This resulted also in an ethical turn in the critique of contemporary art, that means a new criteria that criticises the working processes of a collaborative project, focusing on a moral dimension of a given artwork. The social turn in contemporary art manifests mainly in the emergence of dialogic forms that address an audience outside the art world and also a public that was not necessarily involved before. I would take the case of Thomas Hirschhorn's Bataille Monument, a project that was realised in 2002, which is a primary example for 'collaborative' and 'participatory' projects, in order to understand better the social turn and its critical reception.

For the occasion of Documenta 11, that was declared – by its curator Okwui Enwezor – to be a mul-



GROUP MATERIAL: SUBCULTURE (ADVERTISEMENTS ON THE IRT SUBWAY TRAINS) NYC, 1983

34 Nicolas Bourriaud: *Relational Aesthetics*, Le Presses du Reel, 1998, Paris. In his influential book the french art theorist and curator Nicolas Bourriaud analyses significant art practices from the 1990s, such as the activity of the Young British Artists or the Cuban-American artist, Felix González-Torres. Through these examples he shows the need of a new concept of art that is an activity which creates a bond between concepts, objects and symbols.

35 Bishop, Claire: *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents* in: *Artforum* 44, No. 6, (Feb. 2006)

ticultural and post-colonial Documenta³⁶, Hirschhorn constructed a grunge-installation monument to the surrealist philosopher, George Bataille. He decided to situate this monument outside the main venues of the exhibition, that takes over the city of Kassel every five years. He chose the Friedrich-Wöhler Siedlung, a Turkish-German social housing complex in a low socio-economic suburb of Kassel. He built a communal library and assembled a team of inhabitants. Hirschhorn paid them eight euros an hour, and functioned as an entrepreneur: he chose a needy social group to realise his work instead of involving people as participants of his project. These manual workers got a spotlight for a short term while assisting the apotheosis of the contemporary artist. An equal wrong decision of Hirschhorn was not to credit the names of the people who helped him built the Bataille Monument, whereby he assumed the rules of the institutional art game that grand the artist sole credit. Exactly this discrepancy made socially engaged art practices a disputed effect of the social turn, and at the same time, objects of critical reflection.

At this point it may be relevant to analyse shortly the activity of Group Material, that foreshadowed the social turn, and to point out how curatorial strategies infiltrate into artistic practice, into a practice that still criticised institutions, that also enhanced the merge of curatorial authorship and artistic production.

The New York based group was active from the late 1970's until 1996, basically preferred collective work within a framework of the post-conceptual practice of not producing art, and were dedicated to social communication and political change. Their projects involved specific cultural situations. They were not just artists as creators, but producers, interpreters, activists and cultural workers as well.

The appearance of Group Material was an early indicator of "the social turn" in contemporary art, as well as participatory and relational techniques, including a strong critique of the original museum presentation and biennial structure. The main topic of their resistance was the commercial art world, because they questioned the machinery of art production and the capitalist principles applied in the art world.³⁷

In the 1980's art scene Group Material was connected to other artist-activist projects and alternative spaces that emerged during those years in New York, such as Colab or Alliance for Cultural Democracy; the early members of the group had studied with Joseph Kosuth at the School of Visual Arts, and some of them joined the circles of Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, initiated by Lucy Lippard, Joseph Kosuth, Nancy Spero, Carl Andre et al.

In general, Group Material's aim was to build and show alliances between art and

36 Mercer, Kobena: *Documenta 11*. in: *Frieze*, Issue 69, September 2002

37 Green, Alison: *Citizen Artists: Group Material*, in: *Afterall*, Issue 26



GROUP MATERIAL: AIDS TIMELINE, WHITNEY BIENNIAL, NYC, 1991

its social context, as well as to create alternative publics of art. They used multiple forms of public advertisement: subway posters, newspapers, commercial billboards, shopping bags, mirroring the opinion that displaying art is a public and seriously political event. Going outside from their store front gallery space which they rented from the beginning was also a gesture of mobilising exhibitions and making them active zones for discussions on institutional power, aesthetics, cultural value and its relation to the political discourse.

In 1981 they curated an exhibition entitled *The people's choice*, including kinds of objects donated by people who lived in the area where the gallery was located. The selection articulated the position the group adopted to dematerialise their works, so they could not be transformed into money; the exhibition stayed an ephemeral event, which was also typical for other projects of the group.

Politics and culture cannot be divided, because they depend on historical, economical and social terms. Julie Ault sees the role of cultural activism in reading these terms critically, and in the exposition of the differences between culture, politics and social engagement. This may also deepen my assumption that the curator is often in between different socio-political discourses, therefore has the access to transform the private into public.

The question of what is exactly meant with the notion of the public is also an object of my research, as collectives are organic parts of activism: from small groups to the collective understood as a nation. How to define collective practices? What is the difference between participation and collectivity? These questions are important to pose because the discourse about curatorial practice and its future possibilities was quite active in the last two decades.

*"Collective practice means the conception, production and implementation of works or actions by multiple people with no principle differentiation among them in terms of status. Participation, on the other hand, is initially based on a differentiation between producers and recipients, is interested in the participation of the latter, and turns over a substantial portion of the work to them either at the point of conception or in the further course of the work."*³⁸ – argued Christian Kravagna in his essay entitled *Working on the Community-Models of Participatory Practice*, in which he also mentions the 'working with others' in curatorial practice he sees as a trend *"that is so popular among the young, dynamic curators of mainstream exhibition operations, because it allows for the incorporation of "the social" in small bites that are aesthetically easily digestible, but do not require any further reflection."*

According to this, Claire Bishop in her book *Artificial Hells* also points out the increase of exhibitions organised around the topics collectivity and collaboration, for example *Collective Creativity* by WHW or *Taking the Matter into Common Hands* by Maria Lind et al. Bishop explains this special interest on social networks with the vanishing values of individual success after Cold War era liberalism and its transformation into neoliberalism, where collective practices created a heterogenous net, and were not connected to centralised political parties. In her opinion, *"participatory art is perceived*

38 Christian Kravagna: *Working on the Community Models of Participatory Practice*, http://www.republicart.net/disc/aap/kravagna01_en.htm

to channel art's symbolic capital towards social change."³⁹ Perceiving socially collective practices equally important to artistic gestures leads to a dangerous field, where artworks are evaluated along their social potentials. There is no getting away from this aspect, because, those actors of the contemporary art world who were concerned with the topic of the relations between political issues and art, such as Hito Steyerl, Jacques Ranciere, or Grant Kester⁴⁰ were constantly confronted with the question: how do aesthetics relate to social engagement?

Hito Steyerl argues about the two-faced character of social engagement in contemporary art, that reproduces the shady side of capitalism and neoliberal democracy: *"contemporary art is not only about beauty. It is also about function. What is the function of art within disaster capitalism? Contemporary art feeds on the crumbs of a massive and widespread redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich, conducted by means of an ongoing class struggle from above. [...] Contemporary art thus not only reflects, but actively intervenes in the transition towards a new post-Cold War world order. It is a major player in unevenly advancing semiocapitalism wherever T-Mobile plants its flag. It is involved in mining for raw materials for dual-core processors. It pollutes, gentrifies, and ravishes. It seduces and consumes, then suddenly walks off, breaking your heart. From the deserts of Mongolia to the high plains of Peru, contemporary art is everywhere."*⁴¹

Maybe our expectations are too high. Art may not be meant to be the tool of socio-political change - which is also an undefined concept - but an interface to reveal what happens around us, a tool to understand social and political issues, an educative and discursive platform that activates knowledge. My intention is not to observe the historical roots of activism in art, rather to find and analyse transformative practices, mirroring the potential that art might have for change, to show those progressive practices that assume the rules of art world and its institutions, because, recalling the words of

Andrea Fraser, *"the institution is inside of us, and we can't get outside of ourselves"*⁴², whereby she also states, that the institutional frameworks of art are not going change radically.

"THE INSTITUTION IS INSIDE OF US, AND WE CAN'T GET OUTSIDE OF OURSELVES"

Indeed, this overview was devoted to the institutional critique that shaped many forms from the late 1970s until today, but, the institutional frame seems structurally unaltered despite the number of critical projects and writings against it. The specific formats, such as feminist, postcolonial or queer exhibitions, the interventions of institutional critique, the exodus of artist run spaces

39 Claire Bishop: *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, 2012, p. 13

40 Hito Steyerl is a Berlin-based artist with a special focus on contemporary issues such as feminism, militarisation and knowledge brought on by digital technologies. Steyerl published several texts on the relation of art and politics. Jacques Ranciere is a French philosopher. In his book *'The Politics of Aesthetics'* he rethinks the links of art and politics from the Greek polis to the aesthetic revolution of the modern age. Grant Kester as a theorist researched socially engaged art practices and their political motivation.

41 Hito Steyerl: *Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy*, e-flux journal #21, 12/2010

42 Andrea Fraser: *From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique in: Artforum*, Vol. 44, 2005 September

from institutions appear to have a remote, or no effect on the institution itself. Is there any significance to intervene, to reflect or to express a critique as a curator? Why activism became a key element of artistic strategy?

Artistic critique manifested in various shapes since modernity, as we have seen, that turned into a form of a critical dialogue between artists, curators and institutions. Today the aim is more to discuss political issues, and to open up new possibilities of expression, analysis, collaboration, engagement and commitment. This demand for reflexivity is what Brian Holmes calls extradisciplinary investigations, and defines as *"the notion of transversality, developed by the practitioners of institutional analysis, helps to theorise the assemblages that link actors and resources from the art circuit to projects and experiments that don't exhaust themselves inside it, but rather extend elsewhere. These projects can no longer be unambiguously defined as art. they are based on circulation between disciplines, often involving the real critical reserve of marginal or counter-cultural positions - social movements, political associations, squats, autonomous universities - which can't be reduced to an all-embracing institution."*⁴³

Practically, a new sensibility emerged in the contemporary art scene, that involves artists as well as curators, theoreticians, and activists to step on a passage beyond the boundaries traditionally assigned to their praxis. This extension of artistic and curatorial practice will be the central question of the next chapters. Hereinafter I will observe activist strategies of curatorial practices, processes that are enhancing more a critique of a system (for example, a political order) than criticising institutions. The Croatian curatorial collective, WHW/What, How and for Whom will be my first instance: through the analysis of its curatorial methodologies I would like to show the indirect ways of activating knowledge. I will focus on their process through they observe current political and social issues, and would like to refer the theory again, namely, that the most important aspect of the curatorial function is to organise public.

The following institution related example is going to be tranzit.hu, one part of the international network of five non governmental organisations operating in the Central-Eastern-European region as independent institutions for contemporary art. In my opinion, tranzit's activity is relevant because it describes well how an institution can *reoccupy the infrastructure*.⁴⁴ This means applying the resources of an institution in a more activist-oriented work, by using spaces, technologies and financial support in order to initiate socially relevant projects.

Dave Beech, who is a writer, curator and a member of the artist collective 'Freee', writes about the curatorial function in his book entitled *Curating in the 21 Century*. His interpretation is close to my opinion, and therefore, I chose the following sentences to be a motto of the next chapters, and for my research that quests activism in curatorial practice as well: *"Maybe we are doing something while we are talking, especially when we say something significant. Because acting and saying something are both potential forms of acting on the world."*

The belief, that as a result of acting and saying something significant we might have

43 Brian Holmes: Extradisciplinary Investigations. Towards a New Critique of Institutions, 2007

44 Rogoff, Irit: 'Smuggling' An Embodied Criticality, 2006. http://www.curatorial.net/resources/Rogoff_Smuggling.pdf

power to change something is the basis of my thesis: my statement is (which may fail at the end, but this is also an aspect of researching) that curatorial practice is an appropriate way of activating knowledge and to draw attention to relevant topics involving different disciplines.

"MAYBE WE ARE DOING SOMETHING WHILE WE ARE TALKING, ESPECIALLY WHEN WE SAY SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT. BECAUSE ACTING AND SAYING SOMETHING ARE BOTH POTENTIAL FORMS OF ACTING ON THE WORLD."

ACADEMICS WITH A GENERATIVE CURATORIAL APPROACH: WHW / WHAT, HOW, AND FOR WHOM

"WHAT IS THAT WE EXPECT TO GET FROM ART TODAY?"

"What is that we expect to get from art today? What is its promise and what do we promise it in return? And what happens when these promises get

*broken, betrayed or just plainly exhausted?"*⁴⁵ These unrestful questions were posed by Nataša Ilić, one of the curators of the Croatian, Zagreb based curatorial collective called WHW / What, How and for Whom.

I quote her as a starting point of this chapter because it reminded me of a conversation that really stayed in my mind during the research of my thesis: the discussion was about the importance of believing in art as a curator.

This statement may hit too emotional or dramatic notes, but I am committed to it, particularly because of the current processes that are typical in art production: projects that are maintained to satisfy certain institutional expectations, market forces or fash-

45 Nataša Ilić: Dear Art, Yours Sincerely in: WHW: Dear Art, 2013

ionable trends emerging in contemporary art (which are often generated by biennials) are causing slight disillusion for those who are thinking about art's transformative potential, par excellence. Sensibly, there is a pressure on artists as well to create works that are 'politically engaged' or 'socially relevant', and the force of being relevant results in a general frustration. The social relevance of art is an already encoded attribution, because of art's public nature, and because of the different denotations and abstract narratives that provide intellectual challenges for the spectators. This intellectual content is already there, and can be dredged by curatorial techniques.

The other side of the coin, that defends such a theatrical statement, is the factory of exhibition making, knowledge production, and continuous textualization that employs – and in many cases, also exploits – curators. Under these circumstances art and its traditional qualities may sink into oblivion: the Serbian conceptual artist, Mladen Stilinovic was prompted by this idea to write a letter to art, entitled, *Dear Art*, that inspired the text of Nataša Ilić from which I took the quotation.

Dear Art,
Today, a few understand & love you.
More often you are used, but not appreciated.
Quick manipulation, quick money, quick oblivion.
Money is money. Art is art.
This form of tautology satisfies many people
& you are happy in this paralysis...
 — MLADEN STILINOVIĆ • 1999

MLADEN STILINOVIĆ: DEAR ART (PART OF THE DEAR ART EXHIBITION CATALOGUE)

In the letter that Stilinovic wrote in 1999, the artist expresses his worries about art being at the very moment to sink into "quick manipulation, quick money and quick oblivion".⁴⁶ In addition, he was anxious about works of art with an immanent value, which will disappear because they are might be not as attractive to the market or institutions to stamp a price on them. Beyond the letter's philosophical character, it had also reflected on the time when the countries of the former Yugoslavia started to consolidate after years of Southern-Slavic war and the transition of socialism into capitalism, that were both unprocessed political and social conditions.

Stilinovic's letter was also the starting point of WHW's exhibition: *Dear Art*, that

46 Mladen Stilinovic: *Dear Art*, in: *Tekstovi/Texts*, Zagreb, 2005

endeavoured to discover the role of the cultural institution today, in the face of the crisis that cut the budgets of culture, and also in relation to the discourses, knowledge and social relations that its programme have set out to make. The exhibition also approached art's necessity and artistic autonomy through works that blurred the boundaries between engagement, self-reflectivity and aesthetics. Another ground wherefore I pointed out this exhibition, is an important conclusion that is made in the curatorial statement, where a doubt has been formulated:

"With the growing recognition of our curatorial work being the agent and symptom of the process of normalisation we stood against, and with realisation that critique was being institutionalised and produced through self-referential fields of art the questions of why yet another exhibition – and in what ways, what, how and for whom come together in the concept and realisation of each particular show – become even more pertinent. This sense of unease becomes yet more acute when, despite the fact that critically engaged practices are still (as they always have been) marginally represented in the overall economy of art, the wisdom of the day seems to be, that so called 'political art' and 'political exhibitions' have enjoyed too great a presence in the art production and discourse of recent years, and that it's time to go back to the experience of 'truly' aesthetic and autonomous artistic practice."⁴⁷

This self-reflective statement turns us back to the point of departure, to the letter of Stilinovic, in which he confesses his concerns about the future of art in the globalised world, from a special perspective of a transforming country. Critically engaged practices – both artistic and curatorial – became even more important in an art context that claims for significant topics such as 'the political'. On the other hand, criticality enables to look behind the issues of today's society, although, demanding actual changes from art in political or societal realm is an expectation that can lead to several disappointments. The more realistic idea is to accept the boundaries of art but at the same time, return to its original approaches, methods, innovations and aesthetic values, in order to redefine such abstract and overused concepts as democracy, freedom, collectivity, common sense, crisis or even politics. Abstraction is also a special quality of art that help us understand concepts with difficult connotations, such as violence, right wing extremism, discrimination, racism or fascism. I see the intensity of the curatorial approach of WHW in this motivation, that examines contemporary issues and phenomena from the perspective of art and its critical reflexivity.

Their unique method of translating political, social and economical questions to the language of art, is not just an example of transformative thinking but also a special curatorial attitude. The reason of the observation of the curatorial method of WHW is based on my hypothesis, that the critical reading of history and political ideologies can be a form of activism. My aim in this chapter is to point out activist potentials and tendencies by a sort of close-reading of WHW's methods, and to introduce the political and ideological background of their projects. I decided not to highlight one of their projects, because it may be misleading to go deep into one topic. I will concentrate on typi-

47 WHW: *Dear Art*, Calvert22 Gallery, 2013, London



SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: THE MONUMENT, EAST BERLIN, 1989, © 2010 SIBYLLE BERGEMANN/DSTKREUZ AGENTUR DER FOTOGRAFEN, BERLIN

cal methods of their curatorial approach, their manner of criticality in some selected projects that depict the potentials of cultural activism in curatorial practice.

WHW is inspired by many different participants of culture, such as artists, curators, activists and theoreticians such as Brian Holmes, Boris Buden, Slavoj Žižek, Hito Steyerl or Oliver Ressler. Involving these different actors of culture and science was a fresh way of interpretation in the beginning of the 2000s, when the group began to work together, that since then encouraged interdisciplinary collaboration within the art world. This wide scale of disciplines and practices help them to elaborate complex statements about a fundamental topic: the main interest of the collective's research is art's reflection on its practice, and by selecting works with a critical edge, they revisit their own role as curators time to time.

The group was founded in 1999 and is based in Zagreb, with a concept of a collective curatorial practice. The members are Ivet Ćurlin, Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić and Sabina Sabolović, and the designer and publicist Dejan Kršić. A common interest of the members that gathered them together is the analytical viewpoint on political issues and their effect on society.

In addition the collective leads the non-profit exhibition space called *Galerija Nova* in Zagreb and worked together on several local and international projects: the 11th Istanbul Biennial entitled *What keeps mankind alive?*, the project *Collective Creativity* at Fridericianum in Kassel; recently curated the exhibition *Details* at Bergen Kunsthall, and the biannual contemporary arts festival *Meeting Points 7*, organised in several locations in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe in 2013 and 2014.

A typical method of their practice is the translation of leftist political texts into an exhibition's theoretical framework through which they get involved in a cultural mediation between barely known contents and a broader public. They have introduced lots of artists, thinkers and writers who were unfamiliar to many people before, that underlines their generative process in the interdisciplinary research of art and exhibition making.

The political content of the WHW projects always has historical roots, which are interpreted in the context of contemporary conditions. For instance, the occasion of their first exhibition in 2000, titled *'What, How, and for Whom'*, was the 150th anniversary of the Communist Manifesto, written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, that has been recognised as one of the world's most influential political manuscripts. The text presents an analytical approach to class struggle (both in a historical and in present perspective) and the problems of capitalism, rather than imagining the future of communism.

However the exhibition, opened in 2000, was not a show about the Manifesto itself, the text was more a trigger to organise a public debate on the issues of unprocessed socialist history and political thinking that questioned the transition of post-socialist countries to a neo-liberal direction in politics, that was seen as the only solution at that time.

The same process of curatorial research was typical for the recent international research and exhibition project *'How much fascism?'*. A historical point of view and the analysis of the contemporary situation was combined in *How much fascism?*, that examines nationalism, right-wing extremism, and contemporary fascism in Western-European democracies and other places, as well as in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict,

and in the post-soviet states in Eastern Europe.

The causes of the increasing nationalism contain many different factors, such as the global economical crisis, the raise of nationalism as a reaction on migration, the strengthening of national identities against the uniformisation of the European Union, just to name a few. The point of departure of this initiative is a text entitled *How much fascism?* written by the Slovenian sociologist, theorist and political activist Rastko Mocnik, in 1995, in the midst of the disintegration of Yugoslavia.

Although, the title is a question, the author also states that the issue of fascism is embedded into contemporary conditions. The curatorial proposal begins with a strong assumption that the art world in its isolated position is not the place where the decisions are being made, therefore we have to analyse contradictions that came out from the structural changes that went under the name of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is the dominant political and cultural wave of intellection of recent times. The neoliberal system positions the market as the answer of the most tendencies typical in social and political sphere. This dominant ideal places previously public functions into the private sphere of the market as an unquestionable common sense.⁴⁸

The project examined the following issues: the cognitive power of art, the potential experience for questioning reality, the shaking up of moral complacency, and the political resignation that permit loss of control over the direction of social transformation. In that sense, fascism is understood as a possible response to the internal contradictions of parliamentarianism and classical liberal policies that are not successful when fighting against fascism. The project investigates the fascistoid by-products of liberal democracy, the nature of silent fascism that is sorely needed to be considered since far-right-fascist politics is rising throughout Europe (in Sweden, Finland, Austria, The Netherlands and in Hungary as well).

Hito Steyerl, who has a more general approach to the topic in her essay *Let's talk about fascism*. She argues that politics in the post-democratic time is abandoned and does not have the role of organising the common anymore. This led to a kind of political representation that involves arbitrariness and randomness, and even those who are politically represented feel powerless. She asks the question if people were represented culturally in a positive way, political equality would become more likely, referring to Antonio Gramsci, who stated that cultural representation might function as some sort of *visual democracy*.⁴⁹ I wanted to highlight this thought because it underlines the main theory that is common in WHW projects: the quest of finding the role of art in recent political and social issues, and also the showing of the real face and side effects of leftist thinking.

Another, more personal but in this context still relevant perspective is that I was partly involved in this project, as I was an assistant curator of the connecting group show entitled *'Art under a Dangerous Star / The Responsibility of Art'* organised by tranzit.hu in Budapest.

This coincidence created an occasion to examine WHW's curatorial methodologies from a very close position that also generated some discussions while working on the exhibition's concept and contents.

48 McRuer, Robert: *Crippling Queer Politics, or the Dangers of Neoliberalism*, 2011

49 Steyerl, Hito: *Let's talk about fascism*, in: WHW: *Details*, 2011

A general assumption – that became later a critique of other art professionals as well with whom I talked while collecting reflections on the exhibition – was that a complicated and historically overwhelmed concept, namely fascism was expanded for a wide



POSTER MADE BY THE ARTIST GROUP GRUPO ETCETERA FOR THE EXHIBITION HOW MUCH FASCISM? AT EXTRA CITY KUNST HAL, ANTWERPEN

scale of political and social issues. This extension created the impression that something in its complexity was simplified in order to draw attention, which was also questioned in an interview with WHW, recently published on the visual culture blog of tranzit.hu:

“The subtitle of the project – How Do We Talk About Fascism? – expresses, that we have doubts, as well as we would like to ask questions. We were fully aware of that it might happen, that the term fascism will be trivialised, and we are prepared to assume this disadvantage of the proposal. However, it was more important for us to concern with this issue, to react on what happens around us, as well as to open a debate on contemporary fascism, rather than completely avoiding the topic due to carefulness.”⁵⁰

Another challenge was the interpretation of the elusive concept of fascism and the difficulty to forget its original, historical connotations. Are discrimination, racism, nationalism, right wing extremism, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Ukrainian crisis all different forms of fascism? Has fascism a collective, general meaning or essence?

“Instead of fascism other terms can come into question that are more frequently used recently, such as right-wing extremism, populism or antidemocratic tendencies. At the same time, we find the usage of the term fascism legitim, if it is separated from historical fascism. The link between the two is not that function of fascism which is about making order and stability by applying authoritarian instruments in critical situations. Although, if we talk about contemporary fascism – contrary to historical fascism – we refer not only to fascist political systems, but, as Mocnik also showed, how these mechanisms emerge in a certain political order.”⁵¹

Indeed, the understanding and positioning of fascism was a key moment of the curatorial process as I learned from WHW and which was also embedded in the selection of works for the exhibition *Art under a Dangerous Star*. The title was taken from a short essay written by Ernst Kállai, Hungarian art historian and critic in 1942 about how artists reacted during the Second World War to the existential crisis generated by the rise of fascism.

As it was a very sensitive topic, we concluded that the shared and dangerous essence of contemporary fascism is *over-nationalism*, the tool that helps ideology to infiltrate

⁵⁰ The interview by Zsuzsa László with WHW and Alerta was published on tranzit.hu's visual culture blog, that I translated in order to use it as a primarily resource.

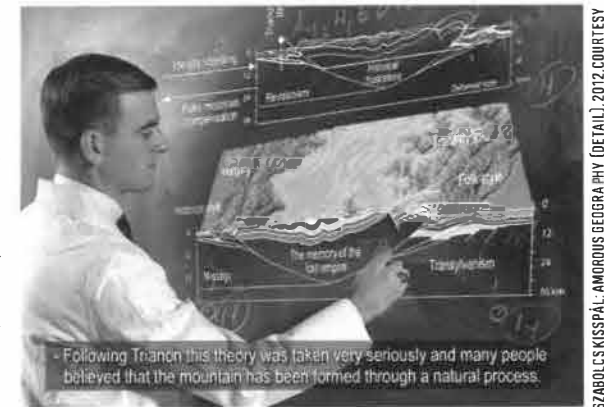
⁵¹ Zsuzsa László: Interview with WHW and Alerta, http://tranzit.blog.hu/2014/05/27/a_fasizmus_egy_hangos_szo_de_nem_er_kivalrol_bekialalni_interju_a_whw_csoporttal_es_az_alertaval



SOCIETE REALISTE: MESOMEMORIAL: THE VICTORY MARCH, 2014, AND SILHOUETTES, 2014, PHOTO: CSABA AKNAV

everyday life, to exist as an invisible threat that can escalate in any moment. Hence it was also a preference to show works that react on the current Hungarian political situation, within which the political Left slowly collapsed in the last ten years, and as I sketched in the introduction as well, a right-wing government consolidated its power with traverse provisions.

However, the attribute “fascist” in Hungary in the recent decades has been a pejorative, yet weightless term. Both the totalitarian leadership during state socialism and the political elite that came to power after the regime change of 1989 declared their value system “antifascist,” even though both kept alive and practiced exclusion in many fields. The political elite of the 1989 regime change did not reflect on the contradictions and divisive potentials of being anti-fascist and supporting neoliberal capitalism. This resulted in an ideological unsettlement in the country, that led to a rising nationalism: the exhibited works are examining the different appearance of nationalism and its discriminative nature. For example – just to name a few from the Hungarian selection – two video works from Szabolcs KissPál, a Hungarian artist-activist who investigates the historical heritage of Trianon and the symbol of Turul⁵² of the fascist Horthy Era⁵³ in Hungary that has been rediscovered by the current government; paintings by Omara, a painter from Romani descent, creates self portraits and



SZABOLCS KISSPÁL: AMOROUS GEOGRAPHY (DETAIL), 2012, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

⁵² Turul is a bird in the origin myth of Hungarian people that was frequently used in nationalist rhetoric as a symbol of power, strength and nobility.

⁵³ Horthy Era was an authoritarian, far-right, fascistic political system established in Hungary between 1919 and 1939, led by Miklós Horthy.

depicts events that happen around her in which she focuses on the fate of Roma women in a society that excludes them; or works from the Hungarian-French artist collective, Societe Realiste dealing with the symbols of totalitarianism which are embodied in public monuments. However, the aim was to contextualise diverse artistic positions about fascism, and to generate new alliances and debates, since the voice of the public sphere is still remote in Hungary.

Returning to WHW's practice, that is based on the translation of different social and cultural conditions, within which they activate knowledge and mediate these activated contexts in the medium of exhibitions, and also in long term projects that include lectures, talks, workshops, etc. The exhibition with its possibilities and boundaries remained a significant public space, a format that gathers people into the room of art: "the

"WE RECOGNIZE EXHIBITIONS AS SPECIFIC SITES WHERE ART IS CRITICALLY PRESENTED AND WHERE KNOWLEDGE IS PRODUCED"

question of the role of art in society is for us closely tied to the exhibition format. Of course, this does not imply that fundamental questions about art should be exclusively formulated in relation to an exhibition format. We recognize exhibitions as specific sites where art is critically presented and where knowledge is produced. We believe that the exhibition has the capacity to reframe the times and spaces of the social world. The exhibition is a creative redefinition that opens up a different perception of the political environment, which in turn might offer a different view of social reality."⁵⁴ – as stated the collective, whereby the public nature of the exhibition space is emphasised again.

Presumably, the most well-known project curated by WHW was the 11th Istanbul Biennial in 2009. The Istanbul Biennial, held every two years is considered as one of the most prestigious art exhibitions, which also functions as a meeting point and a space for professional networking of the international art world. The format of the Biennial is an alternative in comparison to the Venice Biennial, as it prefers a dialogue between art, artists and the audience instead of a national representation model, with pavilions ordered to certain countries.

Nevertheless, announcing WHW as curators of the Istanbul Biennial may still seem controversial in the sense of a critique on biennialisation, the problematic I already sketched above. On the whole, these global exhibitions are like temporary spaces which mediate the colonial ideology, and create an objective relation between the artworks and the spectator, and not to forget, they are also the terrain of curatorial self-representation. Nowadays, globalisation is the main thematic of these grandiose exhibitions, although the periphery still has to follow the Western discourse, which means, the vast of biennials are spreading the ideology of a polarised world, and the heritage of power relations embedded in art world.

This contradiction was enhanced in the curatorial statement, in which the curators

⁵⁴ Sven Spieker: Interview with WHW Collective, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/5-interviews/635-interview-with-whw-collective-zagreb>

took on the challenge, and "put together a biennial informed by a full fledged political program". The aim of the programme was to give access to a broader public, to use "some form of agency, making choices that would boost their capacity of action".

The curatorial concept, similar to the two already mentioned projects, *Dear Art* and *How much fascism?* proceeded a text, in this case, not a political, nor an artistic one, but a literary work with political significance. The title of the exhibition was taken from a song from Bertolt Brecht's piece, *The Threepenny Opera*, which is about the redistribution of ownership within bourgeois society. Brecht wrote the piece in the period of the Weimar Republic, at a time of global economic crisis, when Adolf Hitler was actively aspired to consolidate his totalitarian power. The gesture of re-evaluating a literary work, which is almost a historical document now, and of using it as an illustration of the current situation is a critical commitment.



"In times like these, like ours, art can - and should - involve itself as one of the very few places where unfettered analysis and the exclusion of new concepts, where criticism, education, and even agitation, are possible". - asserts the collective, within they accept art as a platform of participation, a space of critical thinking.

The catalogue of the biennial starts with statistics that is usually hidden due to institutional policies: here we can find an overall calculation about the financial background and funding of the exhibition, as well as a summary about the gender distribution of the exhibiting artists, and other statistic data, that give insight to the machinery of such a grandiose exhibition, that mirrors again a sort of self-reflexivity.

The curatorial concept of the 11th Istanbul Biennial undertook the challenge to show which tools of an exhibition has to mediate a political message to a broader public. Although, reviews and critics highlighted, that the exhibition still spoke the ones that are already convinced. Both an ideological (leftist) and aesthetic preference was crystallised in the selection of artworks, that focused on works with an obvious political content, documentary genres, and works that are operating with graphic diagrams. The representation of reality made a slim chance for interpretation, differences and opinions, which is unfortunately a real genealogy of curatorial practice in political contexts.

The project called *Collective Creativity* was presented at the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel in 2005. The exhibition researched different forms of collective artistic creativity, methodologies of political standpoints and the possibilities of changing the sociopolitical situation through collaborative practices. I chose this project as a last case-study investigating WHW's curatorial methodology because I am interested in the fact that a double meaning of collectivity is being processed: on one hand, the exhibition is about artists working in a collaborative way, but on the other, it also tells us some details about collaborative curating.

The concept of collectivity is a rather misunderstood and somehow overrated belief, if we just think about its idealistic or utopian connotations. According to Colin Crouch, collectivity involves a hidden potential of discrimination, that also refers to the effects of extreme nationalism fascism was built on: "but collectivities can also be used by individuals to seek selfish ends, by turning the power of a particular collectivity against others, from whose expropriation they might gain. A collectivity can be used for aggressive purposes against outsiders, or against internal minorities or against unpopular individuals."⁵⁵

It is interesting to see how collectivity was used for different purposes: in fascism for building a nation's self consciousness, in communism to make people believe that the collective aim is over individual prosperity, and generally, in nationalism to promote one nation's better qualities than others.

Returning to the exhibition, *Collective Creativity* presented collaborative working situations, that are self-governed, and concerned with the creation of independent social spaces, "microcosms" which are transitional fields, created by collective efforts.⁵⁶ These symbolic and also physical sub-fields are intellectual and political, in the sense of creating a free space for social struggle and conflicts, that also establishes tight social connections that allow to reach a development of collective subjectivity, and free and creative progress.

The narrative of the exhibition geographically started in Eastern Europe, and then followed a path from collective authorship to the collective of authors. The post-soviet context as a starting point is a mutual attribute of all WHW projects. Although, this regional focus is not about enhancing the differences of post-soviet art practices, rather about reading things closely and then turning the idea international and more universal.

Eastern-Europe is a relevant point of departure: various alternative artistic practices were developed against the socialist state's cultural censorship. For instance, the neo-avantgarde movement which was the counter-artist or non official art scene during the socialist era in Hungary. The Eastern-European Fluxus network was also a counter-public that gathered intermedia artists beyond the Iron Curtain who were impressed by the (anti)artistic international network based in the USA, Western-Europe and Japan.

Rejecting the vision that collectivity constitutes a homogeneous unity, with contributions by artists such as Joseph Beuys, Pawel Althamer, Artur Zmijewski, Mladen Stilinovic, Superflex, Chto Delat, Raqs Media Collective and others, collective creativity was interpreted as unconventional creative interaction. The exhibition pointed out that collective ways of operating gives a more direct access to social processes.

On the other hand, collective working is not just a thriving format for artists in order to achieve better results, that means artists working together can share working methods and in general, they can be more effective. A collective form of operating in the field of contemporary art has been transferred to the area of the communication of art, that includes collaborations with artists, in which curators are becoming part of a process of group dynamics in which they not only thematise the curatorial process, but also cooperate with others.

55 Colin Crouch: *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism*, p 147.

56 What, How & for Whom: *New Outlines of the Possible*, in: *Collective Creativity*, p.15.

Working collectively is a capital quality of WHW's projects, not just in their inner curatorial circle, but also in the collaboration with a number of artists, social and political organisations such as Alerta - Centre for Monitoring of Right-Wing Extremism and Anti-Democratic Tendencies in Zagreb; activists, philosophers, thinkers, etc. This diversity enables to address more levels outside the academic field, which is in my opinion, the essence of using activist strategies in curatorial practice, that gives an access to political and social issues. From an academic perspective, which is often said to be elitist and isolated, this indirect activism represents a more democratic point of view.

According to Western traditions of art history, the audience approaches art as an autonomous field that is separated from politics. WHW as a group of cultural workers, tries to dismantle these boundaries and introduce a new concept of culture, that is not built on this autonomy. An essential attitude of theirs is not to behave as outsiders. The group assumes the responsibility of intellectuals, which is to draw attention on conflict zones of the present by activating their and others knowledge as well.

MEDIATING BETWEEN LOCAL ISSUES AND INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: TRANZIT.HU

In his essay entitled *Criticism Without Crisis - Crisis Without Criticism* Boris Buden, Zagreb based cultural critic and writer tells an anecdote about a conference he was invited to as a guest lecturer. The story came to his mind because in the other paragraph he is thinking about the younger generation of artist's disinterest in the political meaning of art, because they believe, they are beyond the relations between politics and aesthetics. The revolutionary ideas of the avant-garde simply do not matter to them anymore, because they have more like a direct insight into art without political connotations, they rather see art in its pure aesthetic values. One thing Buden found much more interesting, is that all the participants of the conference were young artists supported by tranzit.org, the network of independent organisations for contemporary art based in Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary. The organisation is funded by Erste Bank, a leading Austrian bank, that, according to Buden, earned an enormous amount of money in Eastern Europe. He was curious whether the artists would have any opinion about this controversial fact, on the way they are being paid for their artistic work, or on the role of art or funding of art under such circumstances. He was also interested because of an article he read in the Viennese daily newspaper, *Der Standard*.

The article reported on the profits of Austrian banks and insurance companies in Eastern Europe, which were in great prosperity before the economical crisis arose in 2008. By asking the participants' opinion he wanted to provoke a debate or at least, to hear criticism, but he didn't succeed because nobody found the economic conditions and material background of their art production worth mentioning.

I wanted to premise this story because it relates to my next topic on several levels. One aspect is that the absence of reflection on institutional dimensions of contemporary art was actually one reason that caused the current critical situation of cultural institutions in Hungary, that refers also to my principal motivation in analysing alternative cultural practices. Another aspect is the critical reception of a privately funded art organisation in Hungary, that was expressed in some professional circles. The edge of the critique was that tranzit.hu despite its unique position does not support the production of new artworks and Hungarian artist's international reputation well enough due to the organisation's focus was put mainly on socially engaged art practices.

Even so, cultural mediation was an absent practice in the contemporary art scene in Hungary. Referring to Irit Rogoff's term, tranzit.hu reoccupied the infrastructure: "*much of the more activist-oriented work within the art field has taken the form of reoccupying infrastructure: using the spaces, technologies, budgets and support staffs and recognised audiences, in order to something quite different: not to reproduce but to reframe questions.*"⁵⁷ This presumes a special kind of approach to the institution that provides a financial, an infrastructural and also a professional framework. In the following part another potential form of curatorial activism will be introduced through the activity of an art organisation that reoccupied infrastructure and uses its resources for being active in conflict zones, both in the art context and the civil sphere.

The association operates also as a platform for professional discourses, and as a community transforming miscellaneous knowledge into educational, curatorial, artistic and activist practices. Tranzit.hu has a highly important role since the governmental intervention into the cultural scene became radical: the association is the only independent institution for contemporary art in Budapest. This significant position of tranzit.hu is part of a protest of the alternative cultural producers against a centralising governmental pressure on the civil sphere.

I chose tranzit as a case study because of its interdisciplinary intention of cultural translation between art, science and various communities. tranzit.hu is not a social or activist organisation, as its main focus is on contemporary art, although, under the management of Dóra Hegyi and her former colleague, Emese Süvecz, curator and feminist activist, the institution endeavoured to inaugurate a conversation in various forms about cultural policy, social issues, social discrimination, Roma politics as well as queer issues, which were topics rarely undertaken by art institutions in Hungary. Taking these aspects into consideration, I make an attempt to interpret some highlighted projects as curatorial positions and find crossovers with activist essentials.

The chapter is structured around three projects established by tranzit.hu, one of them is an alternative art award supporting socially engaged initiatives in the cultural

⁵⁷ Rogoff, Irit: *From Criticism to Critique to Criticality*. eipcp. European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, 2003

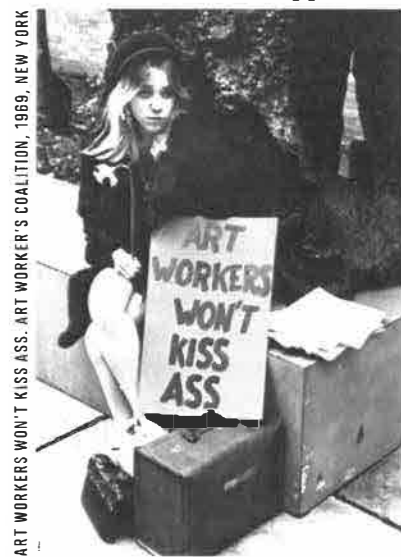
field called *Catalyst Award*, another is the tranzit.hu *Action Day* series, a professional forum reacting to the current situation of cultural policy in Hungary, and the third the *Photography and Activism Workshop* led by the Hungarian photographer, Gabriella Csozso. With this input I would like to underline my idea, that activism can be a curatorial issue in the institutional field, by involving other organisations, exchanging each others methods and by building communities in the cultural scene.

The art scene of the former socialist countries - such as Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary - show some similarities: the hiatus of the art market, the small art scene, and the lack of representative exhibition spaces and significant institutes resulted in an atmosphere of self-doubt. Tranzit.hu is a part of the tranzit.org network working independently in Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary, supported by Erste Foundation. The mission of the association is to mediate, exhibit and put the Hungarian contemporary art and culture in an international context, as well as to function as a cultural mediator between social sphere, non-governmental organisations, alternative initiatives and contemporary art.

This mediation is happening on several layers and in diverse formats, such as long-term research projects, exhibitions, lectures, talks, etc. From the very beginning of tranzit.hu's activity, in the spirit of embedding contemporary art theory, *The Free School for Art Theory and Practice* offers seminars and lectures held by various actors of the international contemporary art scene. The concept of the free school supports the exchange of knowledge and incorporates educational, curatorial and theoretical issues to be discussed in professional circles. The last edition of the free school project involved the curatorial collective WHW / What, How and For Whom, Alerta - Centre for Monitoring of Right-Wing Extremism and Anti-Democratic Tendencies based in Zagreb, the Hungarian philosopher and leftist thinker Tamas M. Gaspar, Marom Jewish Cultural Association as well as activists groups in order to thematise contemporary fascism through real case studies. *The Free School Project* is a unique format of knowledge production that is based on the participation of both the lecturers and the audience.

As a reaction to the current situation of cultural policy in Hungary, tranzit.hu began arranging a forum engaging also organisations outside of contemporary visual art. For the tranzit.hu action day series, tranzit.hu, with the help of the activists of the Student Network, organises monthly forums for one full year for—and with the participation of—contemporary art experts and professionals in the open office of tranzit.hu. The forum is a community platform of informal decision making and action preparation, where a relatively large group of people can make decisions about individual or group action efficiently and democratically. The forum creates online communication interfaces and initiates concrete working groups, whose activities it also coordinates. The key tools for facilitating networking and participation include following the projects that participants are involved in, organizing action days, and personally addressing individuals of various tastes and political orientation. The most pressing issues related to cultural policies, public funding, as well as the possibilities of interventions and strategies for the future are being discussed at the action days. Each event concentrates on a certain topic with the contribution of diverse organisations, for example AICA - International Association of Art Critics, Studio of Young Artists Association, Art Student

Network, Free Artists. Beside these independent associations, the organisers of the action day series invited politicians from the cultural scene, both from the side of the government and from the opposition in order to initiate public discussions, and to make an attempt of practising direct democratic principles. As far as I know, from the government nobody accepted the invitations so far, a gesture that tells a lot about the paralysis of the communication between actual politics and civil society.⁵⁸



"The whole moral system is determined by activist approach. In my opinion, instrumentalisation of issues without taking part in them is an utterly wrong attitude." - told Emese Süvecz, one of the initiators and active participants of the *Action Days*, as I interviewed her about the perspectives of her research and future plans, that bounds together supporting professions and curating. Her point of view reminded me of Lucy Lippard's experience about the gap of social engagement and the elite art world that she felt directly when she became an activist at Art Worker's Coalition in 1968. "In the next two or more years I learned more about the relationship of art and artists to social structures than I had in college, graduate school and ten years in the art world altogether. Like many others, I could never again pretend ignorance of the way art is manipulated by greed, money and power."⁵⁹

These two positions by curators with a totally different background illustrates the effectiveness of combining two different professions such as curatorial practice which is more theoretical and activism with a strong system critique. In this spirit, setting up the *Action Day* series was a curatorial initiative in order to create a space, and in my eyes, symbolises also a practical explanation of Oliver Marchart's theory mentioned before on curatorial function as an organiser of public space.

The idea of founding an award for contemporary art that is given to individuals, projects and initiatives that have an impact on the contemporary art scene and contribute to the mediation of progressive contemporary art is based on the same critical and generative approach, as is the *Free School* project.

Catalyst Award - as its name also indicates - was established to recognise socially engaged, discursive and transformative practices through a democratic selection. The award has a fundamental concept, but it developed since 2010 when the first prize was given in two categories: motor, for initiatives that have been started no later than 2009, are

⁵⁸ In recent days the Minister of State for the Prime Minister's office announced a list about non governmental organisations that were funded by the Norwegian NGO Funds, but from now on they cannot rely on financial support because the government declared them leftist engaged, therefore problematic elements. Among the politically excluded associations we can find an alternative theatre; a feminist organisation against sexual and domestic violence; an association for homosexual rights and another one for basic human rights. This is again actual politics which is not a central point of my questions, but in the context of a NGO organisation that is involved in social activism these political episodes are key moments in resistance.

⁵⁹ Lippard, Lucy: *Get the Message. A Decade of Art for Social Change*, 1984, p.3.

active relatively long term, and function as a catalyst; and novelty for latest catalyst initiatives.

The nomination process is open to the public via an open forum where everyone is invited to debate and set the criteria of selecting the awardees. Recently, the jury decided live on the spot, after an open debate and introduction held by the nominees. The award's focus was to look at tools and possibilities are available for art to intervene into the social fabric, moreover to support the civil sphere, that was overlooked by traditional art awards or state funded art prizes concentrating mainly on artistic production and aesthetic quality.

In 2014 the nomination criteria were created in the framework of an open forum, in order to democratise the selection, to give the audience a crucial role, and also to practice making decisions in a collective way. The forum was organised by the Students Network (HaHa), an association of university students and young activists who organised protests throughout the country against the radical reduction of the number of students approved into higher education, and against the tuition fees which were planned to enact as well in 2012. Demonstrations organised by them were key elements of the resistance against the educational restrictions through they reached and connected other groups, such as cultural actors, social associations and non-governmental organisations. Students Network won the *Catalyst Award 2012* in the novelty category for their effective activist practice that is truly unconventional in the case of an art award.

I see the whole structure of this award, which was elaborated by tranzit.hu curators Dóra Hegyi and Emese Süvecz, as a distinct opportunity of curatorial activism. The idea of an art prize that encourages civil sphere is on one hand a critical commitment, and on the other hand also a long-term investment. Supporting socially engaged initiatives might help the settlement of democratic principles and improve social responsibility as well.

Finally, I think it is particularly relevant to present a project with an educational purpose: the *Photography and Activism Workshop* was supported by tranzit.hu's educational programme, called *Artists at Schools*, that aimed at connecting art and critical pedagogy in order to embed democratic principles in art-pedagogy, and apply them in the education of the next generation. The main question of the project is what role can an artist and artistic knowledge play in teaching democratic and critical thinking, and how traditional education system could integrate a new form of pedagogy.

The original version of the photography workshop was a regularly held collaborative photography course for the members of an activist group of homeless people, called the City is for Everyone (AVM). Participants got cameras and access to work together and learned different forms of visual expression. The homeless activists had to elaborate certain topics through the medium of photography. This method initiated a dialogue about their community, and made a chance to express their feelings about belonging to the society.

The extension of the course involved two high schools: a regular, middle-class students based secondary school, and the Gandhi School in Pécs, southern Hungary, which is an alternative school that integrates Roma and Hungarian students with a disadvantage or with a difficult financial background. The course entitled *About us to you* gathered together youngsters: their task was to formulate a personal wish for their future and another one for a broader community, afterwards they made portraits of

each other with their wishes written on cardboard. Discussing the desires for the future opened a chance to get to know the differences and similarities of their visions about becoming an adult and at the same time a part of the society. At the presentation of the project the participants shared their experiences about the workshop, and an often highlighted aspect was their gratitude about the community that was built during the entire collaboration.

The Artist at Schools project is a specific educational and curatorial programme, and functions as well as an application with special requirements that combines artistic and educational value with the potential of social change. Revealing issues – for

PARTICIPANT OF THE PHOTOGRAPHY AND ACTIVISM COURSE HOLDING A TRANSPARENT WITH A SUBTITLE "EQUALITY". SOURCE: PHOTOGRAPHY AND ACTIVISM FACEBOOK PAGE



instance, Roma integration, social inequality and failures of the educational system – under the surface is both a curatorial and activist mission.

Evidently, the activity of tranzit.hu could be criticised. A more radical commitment is often demanded by the professional scene when tranzit's exceptional situation is being discussed. Another critical point of view is that educational and socially relevant projects are not helping the production of new artworks that could keep Hungarian contemporary art in motion. Although in such socio-political condition an institution of art like tranzit provides an important platform for alternative initiatives and supports social and cultural activism, that means in my interpretation a transformative curatorial approach that has a real potential to discover and handle conflict zones.

ARTISTS FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE

The third perspective of the analysis focuses on artists as actors of the contemporary art scene. I would like to show the curatorial role of artists and their significant quality in organising the public. The following projects were initiated or curated by artists, and go in quest of finding how art and artistic strategies or tactics can play a role in handling social and political conflicts, more dramatically, to react on the ongoing social and political crisis.

It raised a big attention in the art world when Artur Zmijewski was announced to curate the 7th Berlin Biennale in 2012. From the very beginning, the Polish artist was conscious that the subject of the Biennial will investigate the political potential of art, and he also clarified to change the belief that art does not have any social impact.⁶⁰ He proposed in his curatorial statement that the biennale will be a place of action, therefore artists were invited to participate with works that offered confrontational examples of civil activism. In an interview that was published by OnCurating he explains that it was an interesting situation having the institution in hand, that he wanted to use as an access to the state itself, since it built on its administration. He focused on the logic of the state and its hierarchical power structure that controls the citizens, and practices discrimination.

Among the artists was Jonas Staal, visual artist from the Netherlands, who contributed his project New World Summit, that is about establishing a new parliament for political organisations that are registered as terrorists; Pawel Althamer with his work *Sun Ray*, which documents his journey to Minsk, Belarus, where he created an unlawful act where the only happening was that people were walking on the streets; or Nada Prlja with her installation in Kreuzberg entitled *Peace Wall* that criticised the segregation and gentrification of the famous immigrant district in Berlin, to name some of the participants. Zmijewski and the co-curators, Joana Warsza and the Russian group Voina, included non-artists as well, for instance Antanas Mockus, a former mayor of Bogota, who applied artistic strategies in his government, or palestinian refugees, who used the space of the Biennale to asserting their human rights.

*"Does contemporary art have any visible social impact? Can the effects of an artist's work be seen and verified? Does art have any political significance – besides serving as a whipping boy for various populists? Is it possible to engage in a discussion with art – and is it worth doing so? Most of all, why are questions of this kind viewed as a blow against the very essence of art?"*⁶¹ Artur Zmijewski clearly frames the question in his famous manifesto, entitled

"ART HAS THE POWER TO NAME AND DEFINE, TO INTERVENE IN THE WORKINGS OF CULTURE"

Applied Social Arts.

Zmijewski leads the significance of politically committed art back to the Nazi and Soviet regime that made artists feel ashamed about political engagement because art was a tool of propaganda. On the other hand, he also assumed, that the political goals which were demanded by art are purely symbolic, and if they are, what should be the stake? The lack of a real stake behind the projects made the Biennial a controversial event, and it quickly became a metaphor of a show for symbolic representation of artworks with various political content, without counting in the risk that they lose their meaning in the unsettled context of the exhibition. Presumably, a more courageous curatorial statement would

⁶⁰ Artur Zmijewski: Applied Social Arts, 2012

⁶¹ Artur Zmijewski: Applied Social Arts, 2012

have helped the project to succeed, and would have verified Zmijewski's idea as well, that "art has the power to name and define, to intervene in the workings of culture, exert pressure on elements of the social structure by turning them into artefacts (art works)."

The same year as Artur Zmijewski's disputed Berlin Biennial, in the framework of the contemporary art festival, Steirischer Herbst, a day and night marathon camp took place in Graz, Austria. The project called Truth is Concrete, its title from Bertolt Brecht's exile where it was written in big capitals over his desk. The festival had a special accent on artistic strategies in politics and political strategies in art, with 150 hours of lectures, performances, screenings, concerts and discussions. The festival – in line with the Berlin Biennial – proposed, that there is an ongoing shift that urges to reconsider the relationship of art and politics, and criticised the isolation of art by using the slogan, "Art is a left-wing hobby".

The marathon camp format prompted the participants to step out of the role of being a spectator, and also helped to form smaller groups in order to generate debates among the invited artists, activist, theorists from all over the world. One of the exhibitions dealt exactly with my topic of research: the project called Adaptation initiated by Vit Havranek and Zbynek Baladran, investigated an alternative way of curating that involves artists and visitors to take part in maintaining a collection of material ordered around the topic 'adaptation'. The original concepts of an exhibition, a curator or an artist are sinking in the collective process of creating an open space within the institutional art system, where the curators see themselves as inviters and not decision makers. A more flexible role of the curator foreshadows an activist and critical attitude to the institution that communalises society.⁶²

BREAKING NEWS, 2012, FEMEN AT THE 7TH BERLIN BIENNIAL



2012 seems to be the year of radical events related to contemporary art mirroring the urgency of renegotiating the political in art: Berlin Biennial curated in an institutional framework, and Truth is Concrete organised with a community-building, interdisciplinary and activist intention.

Another explicit political and artistic statement was made more than a decade before these events: Christoph Schlingensief's project, *Foreigners out - Please Love Austria* gained an unusually broad publicity in 2000. He "introduced twelve asylum seekers, who spent one week in a shipping container in the center of Vienna, next to the opera house. Blue flags representing Austria's far-right populist FPÖ party were hoisted above the container." As onlookers applauded ambiguously, "a sign bearing the slogan 'Ausländer raus' (Foreigners out) was unveiled and then attached to the container together with the logo of the Kronenzeitung, Austrian's biggest-selling tabloid newspaper. The asylum-seekers were documented live—twenty-four hours a day for six days—on TV

62 Leger, Marc-James: *The Neoliberal Undead*, 2013, p.6.

and the Internet. The audience was asked to phone in and vote 'out' the person they liked at least. That individual was then deported to their native country."⁶³

Schlingensief's public intervention was a radical critique of democratic constitution of our society, and involved media for showing the paradox of the neoliberal Western society that –under the open-minded surface– is repulsive and rascist. Schlingensief contribution to the Wiener Festwochen in 2000 generated a public discussion in Austria about rascism, nationalism and liberal principles, even the commercial media had a keen interest on the public space event, that shows how art could reach several layers of society through a participative and activist practice that makes a direct statement about a hidden conflict zone.

To summarise the selection of examples where artists became actors or agents of representing an issue, I would like to turn to Paul O'Neill's explanation, that describes the artwork's public function and its power to constitute social situations: "The function of the artwork is to create situations of potential agency for the co-productive processes initiated by the artist as post-autonomous producer."⁶⁴

Looking over the artistic strategies according to thematise political questions, it became clear that distinguishing art and activism is a current issue of the self-definition of contemporary art. The social discourse is not a new phenomenon: I see the causes in the culminating social issues and activism in art's reflective nature that was always typical for it. This effect should not be imagined as a linear graph or a progressive course that evolves, but rather as something that shows up in times full of conflicts and in self-doubt social system like the current one.



CHRISTOPH SCHLINGENSIEF: AUSLÄNDER RAUS, FILM SCREENING AT TRANZIT.HU, PHOTO: HAJNALKA TULISZ

63 Maria Hlavajova and Kathrin Rhomberg, "Ausländer raus—Bitte liebt Österreich [Foreigners out—Please love Austria], 2000," in Christoph Schlingensief: *Fear at the Core of Things*, BAK Newsletter #1 (Utrecht: BAK, 2012), p. 28–29.

64 Paul O'Neill: *Three Stages of Public Participation*, 2010

CONCLUSION

Since the 1990s we can experience a prosperity of thematising social issues and the 'political' within art projects, that maintained a social turn in art, that was a new form addressing alternative publics, an artistic approach to the disadvantages of capitalist economy, as well as a direction of institutional critique. In the last two decades not just the notion of art but the role of the curator shifted radically, and turned into more a dialogic and collaborative direction.

The key motivation of researching activist tendencies in contemporary art and curating was a personal experience, as I encountered a conflict zone in between institutional curating and political power, and the keen on reflecting to a profession's opportunity, I would like to practice in the future. My principal aim was to show positive examples from the near past that are concerned with political and social issues, but not engage to them, I tried to handle them with a critical attitude.

By making activism a flexible concept, that was in my interpretation a transformative process in curatorial practice, I examined if art can be used as a tool of catalysing social or political processes, and how a curatorial position is taking place in these critical situations. In quest of finding activist tendencies in alternative curatorial practices, different issues came up such as the political potential of exhibition making, the problematic of biennialisation in recent decades, the paradox of an intense neoliberalisation, the educational purposes of curating as well as the question of curatorial function in general that are topics for each I should have devoted a separate research.

On the other hand, this complexity of thematic came into existence, because these issues are bound together in a curatorial practice with a social and political responsibility, that manifests in collective curatorial initiatives organised around the concepts of self-organisation and collaboration.

These radical cultural practices as proposed by Brian Holmes, imply an exodus from the traditional museum-magazine-gallery system that means also a gesture made by cultural producers to avoid the alienation of unique signatures and the fetishisation of art objects and art experiences via the machinery of institutional art exhibitions.

This vision of cultural activism offers an alternative adaptation of the curatorial function that considers the territory of curating in micro-practices, in communities, and also in the intervention to conflicts.

By investigating the curatorial function and the publics and counter publics within curators' work, I wanted to rethink the boundaries, possibilities and different techniques of curatorial practice and find links between a theoretical discourse around knowledge production and artistic practice. As I analysed different curatorial practices, that are institutional related but at the same time, revisit the function of the infrastructure to invest them in transformative practices.

According to Sabina Sabolovic, one of the curators of WHW, it is still a problematic for culture, art and for activist groups as well to address a broader audience that is

outside the circles of middle-class culture consumers, intellectuals, or academic people who are already inside the discussions, therefore it is still a task to make socially engaged activism in cultural production and in civil society more attractive. This requires a coherent strategy that avoids moral lessons that end in themselves, and also a creative cooperation between the different organisations and initiatives of the civil sphere. This shaking up of the social paralysis is possible via a curatorial attitude that assumes itself as an active participant of social progresses, political debates, and thereby also responsible for the others who are excluded from these levels of public discussion.

Self-reflection, criticality and radical thinking are tools that help curators in the institutional system to make good decisions: it is inevitable to use the infrastructure of art industry that is often criticised as a nest of rising hierarchy, but by applying these resources with responsibility, it becomes possible to act effectively for an issue that makes sense. This may mean the real exodus from the ivory tower that is many cases not the institution itself but rather the boundaries that were established between art and public.

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