

# Social Sculpture re-visited

**With Contributions by**

- Marina Belobrovaja
- Søren Berner
- Beta Local
- Ursula Biemann
- Michael Birchall
- Dario & Mirko Bischofberger
- Fabrizio Boni & Giorgio de Finis
- Eyal Danon
- Altes Finanzamt
- Grandhotel Cosmopolis Augsburg
- San Keller
- Oliver Ressler
- Planting Rice
- Dorothee Richter
- Martin Schick
- Agustina Strüngmann
- Public Works



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### **Imprint**

# Social Sculpture re-visited

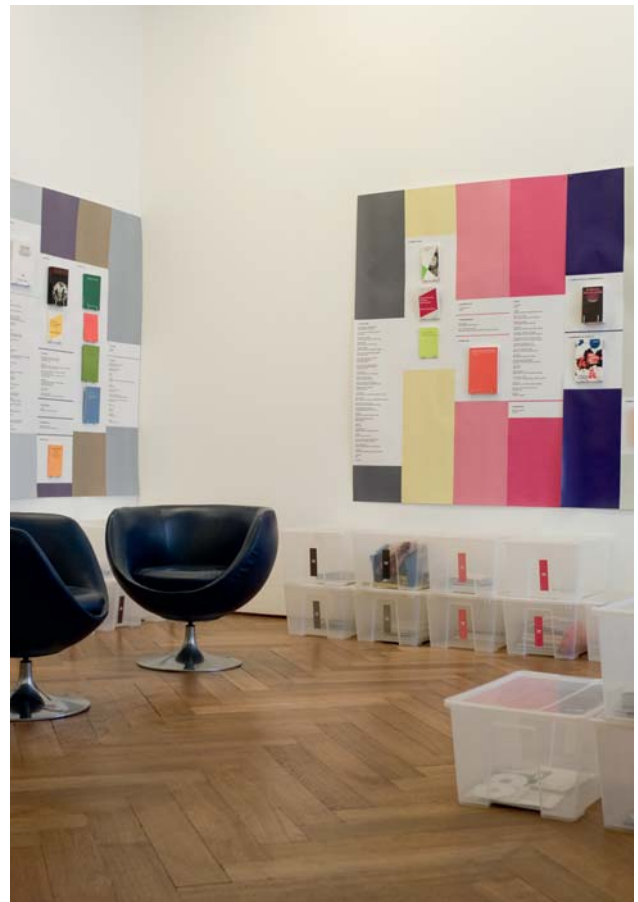
## by Dorothee Richter (part 1) and Michael G. Birchall (part 2)

### Part 1

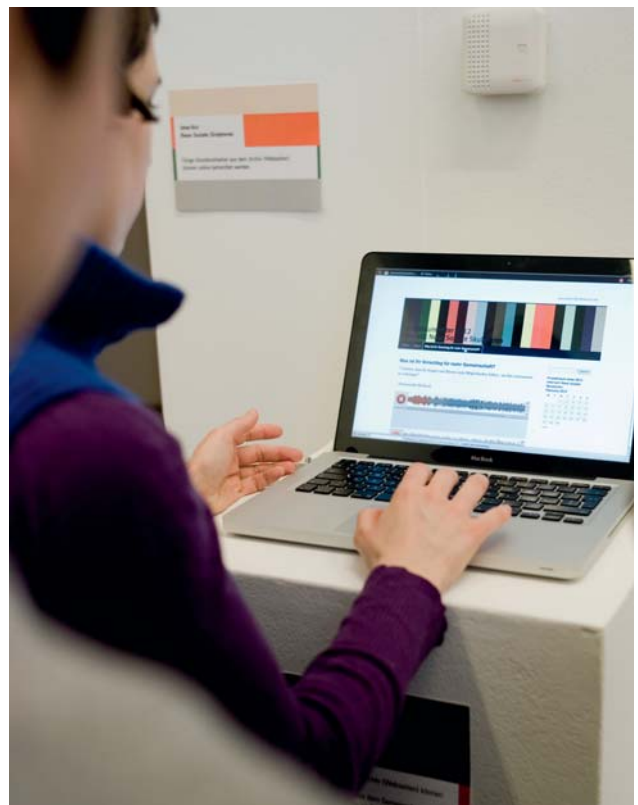
We share our interest in Social Practices in the arts. Therefore I initiated a curatorial project for the Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK, Zürich around the topic of Social Sculptures. The project took place in four different steps over a period of time of one and a half years, the curatorial concept was changed and further developed and produced by the artists, students/ participants and lecturers. The first step was to initiate an archive on artistic practice which an interest in communities, which was shown twice, once at the White Space, Zürich and secondly at Kunstmuseum Thun. The archive was curated by Karin Frei Bernasconi, Siri Peyer and myself, with the cooperation of the students of the programme. From this convolute I invited three artists to work with the students for projects related to the notion of Social Sculpture: Szuper Gallery (Susanne Clausen and Pawlo Kerestey), San Keller and Jeanne van Heeswijk. Each of them developed the projects in workshops with the students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating over a period of about one year.

“Social Sculpture” – the German notion even downplays this term as “Soziale Plastik” was coined by Joseph Beuys, as new form of creating art, and influencing society, his expanded notion of the area of the arts was initiated by the confrontation with Fluxus practices, when he hosted one of the first Fluxus Festivals in Düsseldorf. Beuys became involved into the events and could be seen for a very short time as a member of the Fluxus movement.<sup>1</sup> Joseph Beuys and Bazon Brock introduced concepts such as “direct democracy” or the idea of “Besucherschule” a school for visitors in order to expand the discourse about art into a discourse about art in relation to society.<sup>2</sup> Beuys’ notion of a social sculpture involved elements of an abstruse mysticism related to Rudolf Steiner; on the one hand he wanted direct democracy, but on the other hand he envisioned it as being subordinated to „experts“. These approaches were nevertheless part of a social transformation that shifted and re-arranged power relations. In the case of Beuys the subtext of his artistic production was concerned with the reformulation of national identity by converting semiotic fragments of the National Socialist past into the identity of the new federal republic.<sup>3</sup> We will not exaggerate the discussion about his work here, in spite of the problematic aspects of his re-using nationalistic symbols or fragments of an ideology, the notion of a social sculpture is still interesting and worth to be reconsidered.

Fluxus and the Situationists also re-defined their respective relationships to society, struggling among themselves to articulate positions and make political statements. Especially Fluxus interesting approach was to make the differences and fights public in the newspapers and newsletters they produced.<sup>4</sup> The aim of a social sculpture is to create an “active space”, which functions as a social center, as a laboratory of the communal and as site for aesthetic experiments. Therefore the visitors are active participants, involved in knowledge production, design processes



Archive of Shared Interests – Temporary Life – Temporary Communities, Thun Edition, Kunstmuseum Thun with students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating



and discussions. In that sense the audience and communication is positioned within a much wider framework than in any conventional concept of art, which is still related to the notion of an autonomous artwork.

The first step we undertook was to bring together an archive of artistic positions and of publications related to the notion of community, or more precise, to show the direction the work did develop: the problem of being singular/plural. The first round of artists we invited to the "Archive of shared interests – contemporary life – temporary communities" were: **Marina Belobrovaja / Ursula Bie-mann / Corner College / Jeremy Deller / eggerschlatte / Finger (evolutionäre zellen) / forschungsguppe f / Heinrich Gartentor / Hanswalter Graf / Fritz Haeg / Christina Hemauer & Roman Keller / Michael Hieslmair & Michael Zinganel / interpixel / Martin Kaltwasser & Folke Köbbling / San Keller / Pia Lanzinger / Michaela Melián / metroZones / Peles Empire / Frédéric Post / Public Works / Alain Rappaport / raumlaborberlin / RELAX (chiarenza & hauser & co) / Oliver Ressler / Shedhalle / Erik Steinbrecher / support structure (Celine Condorelli and Gavin Wade) / Szuper Gallery / tat ort / Jeanne van Heeswijk / Markus Weiss.**

Our first physical archive is also documented briefly in OnCurating.org Issue 8, it was developed in the space in cooperation with Jesko Fezer.<sup>5</sup> There is also the list of publications, which formed a project apparatus and functioned as a part of the archive. The issue of community related work that would be situated beyond any notion of relational aesthetics in a political sphere was and still is important for my curatorial practice and the input on the education of future curators, art educators and gallerists. In Issue 7 of OnCurating we published also articles which are related to the topic, titled "Being-with community ontological and political perspectives".

After being invited to Kunstmuseum Thun we wanted to activate the (still unfinished) archive. Communities are defined by artists, scholars and urbanists as an antithesis to general society and its constraints, but they differ widely from one another in the roles they play. Whether the community is thought of as a secret utopia or as a threat to the individual, whether as a cooperative, a neighbourhood or a societal group, and whether or not the respective community is to be dissolved – every time, a certain artistic, architectural or theoretical concept of community initiates a subtext directed toward the public. Certain actions are implicitly designated for the visitors, the users, the readers; the public is revolutionized, integrated, informed, instructed, involved or controlled. The archive is conceived as a project apparatus on the broad theme of "community," an apparatus re-presenting different and contradictory approaches and points of view on the basis of which "community" can be discussed. The archive will serve prospectively as the project apparatus of a research project and is constantly expanded.

Our first step consisted of a spatial re-interpretation by the students of the postgraduate programme in Curating, also we added Thun based artists and students/participants of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating engaged in a series of interviews with inhabitants of the city of Thun, a small city with a lot of military based there. The inhabitants were asked about their community, the city of Thun and what they liked or would have liked to be developed or changed. The interviews could be heard in the exhibition space and more comments could be added. Surprisingly for us was that many interview partners seemed to be quite content with their local community, sometimes they would have liked more nightlife for young adults or more playgrounds. But all in all they expressed a lot of positive feed





Interviews with citizens of Thun led by students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating

back, for examples a veiled young woman talked about the possibility to wear a scarf in contradiction to her country of origin as a important freedom of choice.

As a further development I wanted to give three artistic positions the possibility to develop their approach in a project and I chose Szuper Gallery, San Keller, Jeanne van Heeswijk, as they were long time collaborators with a focus in their approaches on social questions.<sup>6</sup> All of them have found new ways of collaborating with visitors in the aesthetic arena and the respective work approximate a conflict-oriented, sometimes ironical quality of a social sculpture: The needs and concerns of the respective communities should have been included; the answers may have brought surprising twists with it. To enable a long time intensive dialogue I established a pre-production phase with a meeting in Thun between all involved artists and participants of the programme. As it was, the projects did in a way nearly blow the boundaries of the institution, therefore we developed the last phase in Zurich.

The first project was developed by Szuper Gallery (Susanne Clausen and Pawlo Kerestey),<sup>7</sup> and their short concept read as follows: "What is the impact of the permanent state of crisis? What do mountain gorillas have in common with early 21st century city dwellers? What are the connections between the utterings of a recovering stroke patient and a group of children lounging in a gallery? These are some of the elements—physical and conceptual— that make up Szuper Gallery's new project. Economic crisis, global warming, nuclear winter, we are permanently reminded that we are imminently facing a catastrophe. Considering the changing states and the surprising emergence of the normal as crisis, Szuper Gallery presents a multi-layered project in order to explore the notion of performance as social practice. The project includes an installation in the Projektraum (Projectspace "enter") and a new live performance produced in collaboration with Canadian actor and performance artist Michele Sereda, featuring Prof. Klaus Zuberbühler, zoologist, University of St Andrews, Scotland, Colonel General Hans-Ulrich Haldimann, Kommandant Waffenplatz Thun and 30 school children from 2 local primary schools."

Szuper Gallery and Michele Sereda worked with the children inside the museum for two weeks. Not only the children took over the museum space, but also the parents, many of whom had never seen the Museum from inside. The wild action of the children were in the actual performance contradicted with strange inputs by an military officer and a zoologist speaking about borders and about behaviour patterns of other beings, in this case closely related to our species, different apes. On a content level one might parallel the military presence in the city with primitive behaviour patterns of animals about protecting their space, on the other hand the taking over of the museums space by a bunch of children and their parents was already impressive as such and made the restrictions of an art institutions and the social production of space more then obvious.

The second cooperation with the artist San Keller began with a failure, he wanted to stay awake overnight with the participants of the programme and to talk and meditate about notions of art and curating. Nevertheless, the students/participants ignored this offer except one. The students of a postgraduate programme are older then BA and MA students, they often have families and a job, and they are studying as well. So the artistic approach and the actual, sometimes difficult living conditions of curating students did not come together. San Keller was disappointed and redirected his research on curatorial practices and communities towards an unforeseen direction: Instead of working with the students group he invited his earliest collectors, Marianne and Fritz Keller, who own his early work in its entirety (1974–1991). Already back in 2008, the two dedicated collectors converted their private residence in Köniz near Bern into the Museum San Keller





New Social Sculpture 1: Szuper Gallery, choreographer Michele Sereda, students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating and pupils from Thun



New Social Sculpture 2: San Keller with curators Marianne and Fritz Keller and students of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating



(www.museumsankeller.ch).<sup>8</sup> In the project space, the Keller's presented a personal selection of drawings executed by San Keller during his childhood and adolescence, along with excerpts from his diaries. The exhibition provides very personal insights into the creative beginnings of an artist meanwhile known for his conceptual and ephemeral projects. San Keller often uses fictional persona in his works to contemplate means of taking action in society.

In this way the show did address the topic of a family as a small social unit acting within a larger social system. What is the relationship between the "public" and "private" sides of life? Do the works executed in a private context change when viewed through the new perspective afforded by a museum presentation? And does our knowledge of the artist's later success shape our perception of his "early works"? And is it typical for our new neo liberal working conditions that especially cultural producers have to rely on family connections and support? Alongside the exhibition opening with Marianne and Fritz Keller, San Keller presented "Artistic Family Recipes" and invited together with students for an afternoon of walking, swimming, eating – for artists and non-artists and their families. "Please bring bathing suits, a prepared family recipe (small kitchen available)".

The last project in this series of new social sculpture was produced in Zurich where I invited Jeanne van Heeswijk. Her projects distinguish themselves through a strong social involvement. With her work Van Heeswijk stimulates and develops cultural production and creates new public (meeting-)spaces or remodels existing ones. To achieve this she often works closely with artists, designers, architects, software developers, shopkeepers, governments and citizens. She regularly lectures on topics such as urban renewal, participation and cultural production. She was awarded the 2011 Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change and the 2012 Curry Stone Design Prize for Social Design Pioneers. She was also recently appointed as a fellow at Bard College. Jeanne von Heeswijk is also a long time collaborator; we started to work together many years ago, when I was curator at the Kuenstlerhaus in Bremen. Where van Heeswijk assembled about 40 different pieces of locally produced music, from classical concerts of professionals, to choirs for children, Rap and Rock music.<sup>9</sup> Her wonderful projects are manifold, super enthusiastic and often huge.<sup>10</sup> They not only promise or hint to social change, they directly change lives and living conditions. For our small project and very limited financial resources, this edition of "new social sculptures" Jeanne proposed a "Public Faculty", which would be the 7<sup>th</sup> public faculty she initiated. Public faculties are meant to create a public instant discourse on topics, which are viral in the respective society. They function with very little means and are created as ad hoc situations. Jeanne developed the realisation with a group of students, Alejandro Hagen, Anna Trzaska, Anne Koskuluoma, Annemarie Brand, Ashraf Osman, Charlotte Barnes, Chloé Nicolet-dit Félix, Gulru Vardar, Marlies Jost, Monika Molnar, Nkule Mabaso, Tanja Trampe, Tom Schneider and Silvia Simoncelli as the responsible lecturer for the organisational part of the project.<sup>11</sup>

Their texts for the Public Faculty in Zürich reads as follows: "In this edition, the series comes to "Europe's Landlocked Island" of Switzerland to question the idea of borders, as well as notions requisite for the enforcement of this idea, such as security, solidarity, and compliance.

Switzerland has a history of strong borders and an established tradition of civil defines to enforce it. But what does that mean now in the 21st century, when borders have become virtual as well as physical? What is it that needs protection? People? Assets? Institutions? And what does that need protection from? War? Global crises? Science? The Internet? Have existing measures of Civil Defence become merely symbolic, only an image we need to feel secure? In this age of civil



airplanes as terrorist weapons, what are we willing to give up for our protection? Liquids? Swiss-Army knives? Shoes? Underwear? How about civil liberty? Privacy? Minarets? How far are we willing to comply? Is protection ultimately a self-inflicted trap? How about the other venerated Swiss traditions of neutrality and diplomacy? Are they not more relevant than ever before? Is there not strength in communities? Is protection not built on solidarity?"



The passers by were addressed directly: "We're sure you have something to say. Or ask. So come down and talk. Or listen. You can also follow the conversation online on Twitter (#pf7); a live Twitter feed of the event will be on display at the ZHdK Diploma Exhibition. Whichever way you do it, make sure you grab the chance to contribute to this Public Faculty!"

The space of encounter was situated between Helvetiaplatz and the Kanzleiareal in Zurich where many segments of the public are to be found. Public demonstrations in Zurich originate there and, according to the city-tourism website, it is "Zürich's multicultural quarter". Interestingly, the area also happens to sit on top of one of the main bunkers in the city. The students/participants of the programme had in intense possibility to engage in a complex art work in the social sphere. Ashraf Osman did later produce a symposium with Jeanne in Rotterdam with the title "FREEHOUSE: RADICALIZING THE LOCAL". For my understanding of social sculptures or community based work I imagine that some emanations from the art sphere are trespassing the borders of the "discursive formation" of the arts. In the very moment when political agendas and perspectives in the arts form, what was once called a chain of equivalence, at least a temporary goal is shared. The interesting notion of being singular/ plural is, that the community and the individual are no longer seen as contradictory concepts, but the singular entity is based, even

literally produced by an plurality, be that the actual coupling of respective parents or more subtle the notion derived from Lacanian theory, of being spoken in advance, before one is even born. This theoretical approach offers as well the possibility of an influence into a plurality.

As a next step in the exploration of community notions in the arts, we took the opportunity to question more artists from the archive to research and present a diversity of projects and viewpoints and to use the publications to develop a temporary glossary on community issues, the outcome you will find in this issue.

## Part 2

In considering the notion of social sculptures, this issue of *On Curating*, reflects on the projects encountered by the Postgraduate Programme in Curating, and explores this topic into an international context of artists working with social change, housing, politics, food and economics. The range of interviews and essays presented here are reflective of the dynamic range of practices that exist in the social sphere. Many of the projects presented here exist beyond the art circuit, and enter the social consciousness of the spaces they encounter.

Social sculptures may operate outside the boundaries of legality, and beyond their original intention by the artist or designer. Joseph Beuys defined social sculptures in which "every living person becomes a creator, sculptor, or architect of the social organism"<sup>12</sup>. It may be argued that the relationship between the designer and the user constitute a social organism, in the Beuysian sense they are intended for political action.<sup>13</sup> Thus, we see social sculptures emerging between activism, social change and indeed social work. In **Agustina Strüngmann's** essay on **Martin Schick's Learning Centre/Not my Lab (2012-)**, an anti-capitalist and alternative learning centre is discussed, with particular reference to the utopian vision - detached from any practice that would relate to an NGO - as well as projects that work in conjunction with government agencies and community activists. The visionary project from Schick has a long life span, and will evolve with the changing economic and political climate, as well as the utopian vision set out by the artist.

**Dorothee Richter's** essay undertakes to situate artistic and theoretical approaches in a political space and discusses under which conditions political effects can be achieved.

My own contribution outlines the history of socially engaged art since the 1990s, with particular reference to the shifts that have occurred in this decade, especially to more radical ideas of socially engaged art, which share a long history with new genre public art and site-specific art. The essay places the function on exhibitions during the 1990s, such as Mary Jane Jacob's *Culture in Action* (Chicago, 1993-1995) and Valerie Smith's *Sonsbeek 93* (Sonsbeek 93, 1993); the history of social practice can indeed be framed through exhibition histories, rather than individual practices.

**Adriana Domínguez Velasco** interviewed **Beta Local**, a non-profit organization, which functions as a working group, and a physical space based in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In their interview they discuss the public programme, and how it operates as an experimental education project and a platform for critical discussion, which is immersed in the local reality of San Juan. **Agustina Strüngmann** interviewed artists **San Keller** and **Martin Schick** in relation to their learning centre project: a modest wooden structure in Fribourg, Germany that provides a space to



think collectively about alternatives to capitalism. Schick invites participants to engage in workshops to imagine and practice a life without capitalism. The interviews explore the meaning of the centre and how it becomes an open stage for possibilities.

**Anna Fech's** interview is with **The Grandhotel Cosmopolis Augsburg (Germany)**. Based on the idea of the social sculpture, this hotel accommodates refugees, artists, musicians, and travellers under the same roof. Unlike in ordinary asylum seeker homes, this model provides an alternative solution of how refugees can be integrated into social life rather than live completely isolated from society. **Dina Yakerson** interviewed Eyal Danon, the director of **The Israeli Digital Center**, Jessy Cohen Neighbourhood, Holon, Israel. Focusing on the outreach at the centre, the interview discusses the transformation of the neighbourhood and how the institution dealt with a new generation of audiences. The Jessy Cohen project has altered the curatorial nature of the centres programme and allowed them to work the social and political context of the area.

**Eleonora Stassi's** interview with filmmakers **Fabrizio Boni, Giorgio de Finis, Dario Bischofberger** and **Mirko Bischofberger** discusses the role of story telling and communities in the context of science fiction films. **Kenneth Paranada** interviewed the Manila-based curatorial collective **Planting Rice**. Working in a location, which often presents contemporary art production, their programme raises an awareness of this problem, by building partnerships with local organizations and discussing the notion of architecture, institutions, funding, and art education.

**Nadja Baldini's** interview with **Søren Berner** focuses on his current radio project with young students at a vocational school in Switzerland. In collaboration with the musician Balint Dobozi, they together produce sounds and interviews in which they reflect on their work and everyday realities and share their dreams, fears, and visions of the future. Berner is attempting to open up new ways of agency through collective action and the critical examination of the conditions and institutions that shape us. **Silvia Converso's** interview with **Altes Finanzamt** discusses the collective's practice in Berlin, and how they dedicate themselves to a range of mixed media practices and host weekly events for the community such as readings, parties, exhibitions, concerts, and film screenings.

The questionnaires features in this issue were developed by the students as a means of interviewing participants who were part of the first Social Sculpture project, their responses reflect the changing nature of community art in a wider context, and include contributions by: **Marina Belobrovaja, Ursula Biemann, ForschungsgruppeF, Oliver Ressler** and **Public Works**.

### Notes

1 For more detailed information see Dorothee Richter, Fluxus. Kunst – gleich Leben? Mythen um Autorschaft, Produktion, Geschlecht und Gemeinschaft, (Fluxus: Art – Synonymous with Life? Myths about Authorship, Production, Gender and Community), only available in German, Zürich 2013.

2 Bazon Brock, Ästhetik als Vermittlung. Arbeitsbiographie eines Generalisten. Köln 1977.

3 I will not discuss this problem in detail but would like to draw the attention of interested readers to this publications: - Frank Gieseke, Albert Markert,

Flieger, Filz und Vaterland, eine erweiterte Beuys Biografie, Berlin 1996; Grasskamp, Walter, »Soziale Plastik. Schwierigkeiten mit Beuys« in Walter Grasskamp: Der lange Marsch durch die Illusionen. Über Kunst und Politik. München 1995; Beat Wyss, »Beuys, der ewige Hitlerjunge«, in Monopol, Nr. 10/2008, S.81-82, Berlin, 2008;

4 see Dorothee Richter, Fluxus. Kunst gleich Leben? Mythen um Autorschaft, Produktion, Geschlecht und Gemeinschaft, Zürich 2012.

5 see Dorothee Richter, „A Platform, some Projects, Postgraduate Programme in Curating, Zurich,“ OnCurating Issue 8, p.9-13.

6 New Social Sculpture 1,2,3, curated by Dorothee Richter/ Postgraduate Programme in curating.

7 For Szuper Gallery's work see also <http://www.szuper.org/> accessed Jan. 6th 2015; Szuper Gallery (Susanne Clausen, Pawlo Kerestey) (ed.) , Liftarchiv, Frankfurt a. M. 2007; Szuper Gallery, ed., Ballet, Zürich 2014.

8 See <http://www.museumsankeller.ch/> accessed Jan. 6th 2015. San Keller did also provide a contribution in OnCurating Issue, a transcript of a public conversation with curator Rein Wolfs about the budget of his upcoming project with the Fridericianum, where Rein was curator at that time, see On-Curating.org Issue 08, Institution as medium. Curating as institutional critique? Part 1, <http://www.on-curating.org/index.php/issue-8.html#.VKxoq0jGrLZ> accessed Jan. 6th 2015.

9 See Dorothee Richter, Kuenstlerhaus Bremen(ed.), Programming for a Kuenstlerhaus, Institut für zeitgenössische Kunst, Nürnberg, 2002.

10 See <http://www.jeanetworks.net/> accessed Jan. 6th 2015.

11 (Public Faculty No 7 /New Social Sculpture 3) curated by Dorothee Richter/ Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK, and Jeanne van Heeswijk; coordinated: Silvia Simoncelli; Digital media & communication: Ashraf Osman; produced: Alejandro Hagen, Anna Trzaska, Anne Koskiluoma, Annemarie Brand, Ashraf Osman, Charlotte Barnes, Chloé Nicolet-dit Félix, Gulru Vardar, Marlies Jost, Monika Molnar, Nkule Mabaso, Tanja Trampe, Tom Schneider.

12 Jane Rendell, Art and architecture: a place between, (2006), London, I. B. Tauris. pg. 173

13 Ibid.

# Socially engaged art in the 1990s and beyond<sup>1</sup>

## by Michael G. Birchall

The shifts in community art, to more radical ideas of socially engaged art, share a long history with new genre public art and site-specific art; these practices are largely overlooked in the period, as we focus our attention to the socially engaged models. However, in this text I attempt to discuss the legacy of site-specific exhibitions since the 1990s. It is during this period where we first see a tendency towards the site in exhibitions, which then becomes a standard practice later on. As early as 1973, while discussing site specificity, Daniel Buren proclaimed:

Whether the place in which the work is shown imprints and marks this work, whatever it may be, or whether the work itself is directly—consciously or not—produced for the Museum, any work presented in that framework, if it does not explicitly examine the influence of the framework upon itself, falls into the illusion of self-sufficiency—or idealism.”<sup>2</sup>

More so than the museum, the site comes to encompass several interrelated but different spaces and economies, including the studio, gallery, museum, art history, and the art market. All of these nodes constitute a system of practices that is not separate from, but open to, social, economic, and political pressures. To be site-specific is to decide or recode the conventional conventions and to expose their hidden operations, to reveal the ways in which institutions shape art’s meaning to challenge its cultural and economic value.

The new public art that came into the spotlight in the 1990s was a new practice; the application of the genre of public art made digestible some sort of art known under more specific labels, such as feminist performance. Curator Mary Jane Jacob, who was writing in the 1990s, notes that the increase in activity around public art that addresses social issues was dramatic.<sup>3</sup> I define the 1990s as being an important point in the shift of socially engaged art, with major exhibitions such as Culture in Action in Chicago, Sonsbeek 93 in the Netherlands, as well as Project Unité in France. These exhibitions acted as a precursor to what is now known as socially engaged art—and what has become expected from biennials, exhibitions, and art fairs around the world. A curator invites a group of artists to generate work within a specific locale. What emerged in the 1990s was a trend or a renewed interest in socially engaged art and the political exhibition. Exhibitions from this period frame a range of art practices, as Claire Bishop notes: “The curatorial framework is tighter and stronger than the projects by individual artists, which are open-ended, unframed, and moreover made in response to a curatorial proposition.”<sup>4</sup> It is in these propositions where we see the turn towards the social emerge in the exhibition format of the 1990s and indeed beyond into contemporary biennial production.

When viewers become participants in a work of art, or co-producers, there is a transition in the aesthetic considerations. It could be said that socially engaged art is the neo-avant-garde; artists use social situations to produce de-materialized,

anti-market, politically engaged projects that carry on the modest call to blur art and life. In reaction to this, art critique focusing on socially engaged art is concerned with ethical considerations. The social turn in contemporary art has prompted this ethical turn in criticism. Emphasis is placed on “how” collaborations are undertaken; artists are judged by their processes and how successful collaboration is developed.<sup>5</sup> Critique is given for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to “fully” represent their subjects.<sup>6</sup> During the 1990s, curators were the ones who first brought these practices to the attention of the art world, not only in exhibitions but also in their writing. Far beyond the ideas set out in Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* (1997), curators such as Maria Lind and Mary Jane Jacob have become ambassadors for socially engaged art as well as being responsible for the canonisation of the discourse.<sup>7</sup>

The exhibition *Culture in Action*, took place in Chicago from 1993-1995, in deprived areas of the city; that same year *Sonsbeek 93* opened in Arnhem in the Netherlands, curated by Valerie Smith. Both exhibitions frame the artistic practices through curatorial statements, which were made in response to curatorial propositions. This elevates the position of the curator to that of author, who uses a curatorial framework to present a specific set of ideas or practices to the public, in a position that is usually occupied by artists.

Valerie Smith's proposal was about creating context-orientated issues and the individual's relation to the social environment. The art for *Sonsbeek 93*, “should be site-specific of situational work,” she wrote. “The work must create meaning from and for the place in which it exists.”<sup>8</sup> Smith's ambition was to create a series of projects produced by artists after spending no more than twenty-four hours in the city to do their research. Her catalogue on the exhibition demonstrates a case study in site-specific curating, as well as giving the impression that the curator is no longer a mediator between the artist and the public. It represents a desire to co-produce socially relevant art for many audiences.

Most of the work in the exhibition was sculptural; however, Mark Dion conducted a series of interventions in a museum attached to the royal home for retired veterans. The museum houses a collection based on their belongings acquired during their overseas missions. Dion's contribution addressed the display system at the museum and exposed a conflict. The veterans disliked the curators, as they decided which works would be exhibited after they had passed away. As an antagonistic response to this, Dion's project saw the creation of two display cabinets, filling them with objects belonging to the veterans—specifically those objects that would not make it into the collection. The German duo, Irene and Christine Hühnenbüchler, worked with prisoners at Arnhem prison to produce a series of paintings, installed in small huts inside the prisons walls. The artists had previously worked with community groups and following this project at *Sonsbeek*, they went on to work at two psychiatric clinics in Germany. Both Dion's and Hühnenbüchler's projects dealt with the social, yet at the time Valerie Smith was reluctant to use this term.

Bishop notes that prior to the institutionalization of participatory art following relational aesthetics, there was no adequate language for dealing with works of art in the social sphere that were not simply activist or community art.<sup>9</sup> Although Smith's exhibition hinges on the social tendencies that are omnipresent in exhibitions of today, during the same period it was Suzanne Lacy who coined the term *New Genre Public Art* and discussed the emergence of this practice at a particular moment in the US: while large shifts were taking place in both art institutions and also beyond this.



Culture in Action (1993–1995) is regarded as changing the way the art is mediated in public spaces; curators consider it to be a new model of curatorial practice that changed how we create community projects. Quoting from the press release, the exhibition “established a new vocabulary within the genre of urban-oriented sculpture exhibitions and tested the territory of public interaction and participation.”<sup>10</sup> Curator Mary Jane Jacob's goal was to shift the role of the viewer from passive spectator to an active art-maker. This was perhaps her “curatorial statement,” which became central to the exhibition; in total eight projects were created as community collaborations and were facilitated by artists and the not-for-profit organisation Sculpture Chicago. Projects included: Suzanne Lacy's commemorative boulders; a multi-ethnic parade by Daniel J. Martinez; a new candy bar designed and produced in collaboration with members of the candy-making union by Simon Grenan and Christopher Sperandio; a storefront hydroponic garden to grow food for HIV/AIDS patients by the collaborative team of Haha–Richard House, Wendy Jakob, Laurie Palmer, and John Ploof–with Flood (a network of health care volunteers).

The exhibition received theoretical and critical comments in the 1990s, as it emerged at a key moment in the development of community-engaged work. The projects in the exhibition are somewhat contradictory, since they express an activist desire to interact directly with new audiences and accomplish concrete goals; and they achieved this through an embrace of open-endedness, in which the artist is recognised as a facilitator of others' creativity.<sup>11</sup> It embodied and institutionalised a convergence of significant conceptual and historical developments from the 60s through to the 90s. It altered the way we consider public space, rethought the potential of art production as a catalyst for social activism, and experimented with new models of community-based artistic cultural engagement. Fundamentally, it proposed a new ethos of social and political responsibility, as exemplified by artists committed to working with urban citizens in their everyday circumstances of economics, class, labour, and ethnicity.<sup>12</sup>

A contemporary example of this transformation, into how the social has permeated into the biennial model, would be Jeanne van Heeswijk's 2Up2DHomebaked (2012–) in Liverpool, a project (in the framework of) the Liverpool Biennial. This project features a collaboration with a strong community association who were determined to reopen their local bakery and to revitalize their failing community. Van Heeswijk decided to engage in this project after spending some time in the area. In an area that was not part of Liverpool's post-industrialisation regeneration, the project now runs as a functioning bakery, selling breads, cakes, and pies, and is able to sustain itself as a viable business model. In addition, apprenticeships have been offered, as well as baking courses to train future bakers.

In the spirit of enterprise culture, funding for equipment has been raised using micro-finance websites, with the support of the art establishment. Jeanne van Heeswijk is an expert in developing socially engaged work of this kind, having done several other works in the Netherlands, the UK, and Germany in recent years. Her practice as an artist involves bringing communities together in the context of sustainable art projects that gives them a voice. Her expertise as a cultural producer can be seen in the outcome of her projects, as they go on to revitalise communities or provide critique on local political issues. 2Up2DHomebaked has brought a community together and also enabled the Liverpool Biennial to promote itself beyond the established art circuit. Systems of the bourgeois public sphere, the mass media, and the art system are co-opted and politicized. It is exactly the kind of project art-funding agencies like to promote, and in Liverpool it is working well.

In this case, the biennial and the artist entered into the fray of a socially engaged project. In many ways contemporary art has absorbed methodological strategies from anthropology and reformulates the “collaborative” interaction between the artist and a local community group.<sup>13</sup> Hal Foster notes this phenomenon in these practices—as the artists position themselves as outsiders who have the institutional authority to engage the local community in the production of the artists’ self-representation. I am cautious as to what this may mean for future long-term projects, and to quote Foster: “The quasi-anthropological role set up for the artist can promote a presuming as much as a questioning of ethnographic authority, an evasion as often as an extension of institutional critique.”<sup>14</sup> While the curator may no longer be a carer of collections, in the museological sense, in this context, they become a carer of communities—becoming embedded in the context within which they work, and producing socially relevant work for their audiences, with the community being at the forefront. In many ways this can become a problematic social mission.

While curators, biennials, and commissioning bodies may reap the benefits from establishing socially engaged projects, they add value or gentrify deprived areas into “unique” locales.<sup>15</sup> 2Up2DHomebaked has been established as a counter model to the wider regeneration that has taken place in a specific area. However, inadvertently this may pave the way for a second round of regeneration as the locale becomes more attractive due to the successes and publicity from a project commissioned by the Liverpool Biennial. This is part of a wider shift in biennial production, where the locale becomes the emphasis for long-term projects that impact the city over a period of time, in place of short bursts of artistic activity. This sustainability is not only about long-term projects, but also about maintaining a presence in the art community in the city, and acting as a site of production in association with guest curators and artists who may develop elements of the programme.

Projects such as 2Up2DHomebaked function well as the focus on local issues; however, they become problematic when state authorities try to use art projects as a “social-work.” The decline of community art in the UK was replaced with the socially engaged project via government-sponsored funding initiatives. This model established by curators and institutions stems from a desire to engage “real” non-art places, and prepare the way for the conversion of abstract or nonexistent space into “unique” “authentic” locales, thus increasing the chance for real community engagement. The people involved in this process can, according to Miwon Kwon, “install new forms of urban primitivism over socially neglected minority groups.”<sup>16</sup> However, community groups needn’t be “neglected” or even a “minority,” as in the case of The Edgware Road Project, where all members of this community could involve themselves in the process regardless of their ethnicity. The level of community involvement is dependent on the willingness of the participants and on their desire to learn and acquire new skills. Superflex’s Tennantspin, commissioned by FACT in Liverpool, empowered local residents living in a high-rise development to film, program, and edit their own local TV show. Superflex provided the groups with the resources to engage with TV, and used the institutional affiliation—FACT, one of the UK’s largest media arts centres—to facilitate this process.

Community art is primarily about fulfilling its purpose to strengthen a community’s sense of self by promoting “feel-good” social values.<sup>17</sup> They are often aimed at marginalised groups in poor areas and aim to empower the community. Suzanne Lacy defines “interactive, community-based projects”<sup>18</sup> as being a special genre that developed through social practice. Her use of the term new genre public

art reveals an interest in artworks that have practical value and make political impact. They respond to local contexts and cultures, and are less emphasised on the creation of objects per se, than with the collaborative process that develops the consciousness of the artist and co-participants<sup>19</sup>

There has been a significant shift in the way community art is delivered through exhibitions and public programmes, in what is now largely regarded as socially engaged art. Socially engaged art takes reference points from the history of community art, but as Pablo Helguera notes, "It expands the depth of the social relationship, at times promoting ideas such as empowerment, criticality, and substitutability among its participants."<sup>20</sup> However, the community art practices and new genre public art of Culture in Action equally empowered the local communities, who were able to engage with the social models that were put in place. Socially engaged art may offer an alternative name, which perhaps fits more comfortably within the power relations of the art world, without the connotations of badly painted sculptures associated with community arts. It is unequivocal that today's socially engaged art continues the practice of community arts, as both artists and participants may engage in a project over a period of time. Fundamentally it remains the same, and one could argue, community arts in the 1970s and 1980s in Great Britain presented a range of radical political practices that were radicalizing feminist groups, local councils, and young people.<sup>21</sup> Kwon puts forth the view that in social practices there is an assumption that communities are coherent and unified. Instead she asserts that communities are unstable before the artist brings his or her work.<sup>22</sup>

The difficulty faced with socially engaged art is the act of unifying the social conditions; communities, whether they are unstable or not, do not always require an opening up or a dialogue instigated by an artist, a curator, or an institution. As the dialogue broadens around this issue, huge disparities grow between the Anglo-American context and European conditions. As the welfare state becomes neoliberalised, or watered down, "culture," as the term broadly used by politicians, is brought in as a mechanism to instigate a dialogue with a community. Questioning the necessity of socially engaged projects becomes ever more prevalent, as we may become tangled up between what is "ethically" right and what is required by funding bodies. The labour years in the UK may be regarded as "cool Britannia" due to Britain's cultural outputs during this period, yet they also mark a period of social engineering. The "do good" mentality of social practice may be concerned with generating social work for communities, which allows them to be targeted by arts institutions, government funding bodies and increasingly private companies.

Projects such as Suzanne Lacy's *The Crystal Quilt* and *Mother's Day* in Minneapolis (1987) featured 430 older women discussing hopes and fears of ageing, their accomplishments and disappointments.<sup>23</sup> Lacy's projects offer a sense of empowerment to the specific women who are part of the event. One could easily refer to this as a socially engaged work or as a community art piece. The critique of "new genre public art" argues that it has a lack of political analysis and that projects operate with a mixture of pastoral care and education that displays "pseudo religious traits."<sup>24</sup> New genre public art is mostly comprised of projects with marginalised communities such as the homeless or HIV-infected people. However, it remains clear that the "do good" motivation is what drives community art facilitators, many of whom are not visual artists, but have trained in other areas such as pedagogy and social work.<sup>25</sup>

Within the practices of Johanna Billing, Annika Eriksson, Jeremy Deller, and Phil Collins (to name a few), these artists share an interest in the social, political, and economic conditions of communities and the rich context their locales possess as source material for ideas, discussion, and critique. While the aforementioned artists may not cite their work as socially engaged, there still remains an inherent social quality to their work. There is not a desire to commit to a "social practice," as some artists have gone on to do, but rather to incorporate these questions into their practice. Jeremy Deller's well-known video and performance, *The Battle Of Orgreave* (2001), features a re-enactment of a violent clash between miners and policemen in Yorkshire, England that took place in 1984. His reconstruction brought former miners and residents together with historical re-enactment societies who restaged the conflict for the public. This fuses art production with the social, and its aim is to be seen in official institutions as well as providing a cathartic exercise for the community involved. In socially engaged art, the task placed on the artist and the curator to work with a specific group is no longer limited to those groups with fixed identities—from different socio-economic backgrounds. It also functions as a critique of the shared values of "Communitarianism conscious"<sup>26</sup> politics that were reflected in early community art as well as Marxist notions of community unified by class struggle.

As contemporary art production has moved towards collective, self-organised, participatory, and socially engaged art as a response to the new labour conditions in neo-liberal societies, what has emerged in this field is a significant shift in how art is produced, mediated, and curated. Artists, curators, institutions, and publics all respond to socially engaged art in numerous ways; whether they are commissioned directly by publicly funded entities or via the artists' own initiatives. The latter may become a prevailing model, as the microfinance alternative allows for a greater level of autonomy, without the intervention of state-sponsored financing. When the curator becomes part of the social enterprise model—on large projects to drastically alter an area—they become part of a capital-intensive social regenerative scheme. The outcome is that the curator's or artist's labour contributes to a process of capital accumulation. In the widest sense, it provides an attractive milieu for business and further investment.

## Notes

1 This essay derives out of a lecture delivered at Open Engagement in May 2012.

2 Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Museum," *Artforum*, September 1973 [missing page nos.].

3 Mary Jane Jacob, "An Unfashionable Audience," in Suzanne Lacy (ed.), *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle, WA, 1995.

4 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London, 2011, p. 217.

5 Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," *Artforum*, 2006, pp. 178–183.

6 Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents."

7 See: Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson, *Taking the Matter into Common Hands Black Dog*, London, 2007; Maria Lind, "Returning on Bikes: Notes on Social Practice," in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, Thompson, N. (ed.) *Creative Time*, New York, 2012; Mary Jane Jacob, "An Unfashionable Audience," in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Lacy, S. (ed.), Bay Press, Seattle, WA, 1995; Jacob, M. J., Brenson, M., Olson, E. M. and *Sculpture Chicago*, *Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1995.



- 8 Valérie Smith, "Sonsbeek 93," in Brand, J. and de Muynck, C. (eds.), *Sonsbeek 93*, Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon, Ghent, 1993.
- 9 Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, p. 202.
- 10 Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, p. 100.
- 11 Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, p. 213.
- 12 Joshua Decker and Helmut Draxler, *Exhibition as Social Intervention: 'Culture in Action' 1993*, Afterall, Koenig [distributor], London, 2014.
- 13 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996.
- 14 Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*.
- 15 Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, p. 213.
- 16 Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, p. 151.
- 17 Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*, Jorge Pinto Books, New York, 2011, p. 11.
- 18 Suzanne Lacy, "Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art," in Suzanne Lacy (ed.), *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle, WA, 1995, pp. 171–188.
- 19 Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*.
- 20 Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, p. 18.
- 21 Owen Kelly, *Community, Art, and the State: Storming the Citadels*, Comedia Publishing Group in association with Marion Boyars, London; New York, 1984.
- 22 Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*.
- 23 Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson, *Taking the Matter into Common Hands*, p. 24.
- 24 Marius Babias, Hamburg, Kulturbehörde, and Kravagna, C., *Die Kunst des Öffentlichen: Projekte, Ideen, Stadtplanungsprozesse im politischen, sozialen, öffentlichen Raum ; [diese Publikation erscheint anlässlich des Projekts Weitergehen im Rahmen des Programms Kunst im öffentlichen Raum der Kulturbehörde der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg]*, Verl. der Kunst, G+B Fine Arts, Dresden; Amsterdam, 1998.
- 25 A specific example of a community art group is "fort da", based in Karlsruhe, Germany. This ten-person group consists of artists, teachers, designers, and art historians. They create and foster community projects for mainstream museums.
- 26 Möntmann, N. (2010) *ARTocracy: art, informal space, and social consequence: a curatorial handbook in collaborative practice*, Sacramento, N. and Zeiske, C. (eds.), Berlin, Jovis.

# Deliberations–Communities

## by Dorothee Richter

Communities are in the realm of contemporary art often seen as romanticised situations, as performed or represented in meetings and dinners of relational aesthetics. The term “Relational Aesthetics” functions already as a closure of very different approaches and therefore did level in a way the earlier critical voices/ artistic positions, like Fluxus or practices which are described in Suzanne Lacy’s writings on “New Genre Public Art.”<sup>1</sup> But the situation has changed in the last five years; now, crisis and catastrophe are always around the next corner, or to be more precise—it is always one click away. This click might start a financial breakdown, a new war, or just some terroristic acts. Here in the scenarios proposed by Szuper Gallery in their latest works, we are actually after the big bang, which restages the catastrophe with an elaborate environment and a big group of performers; the work is inspired by the project they did in the series *New Social Sculptures* at the Kunstmuseum Thun. Whatever happened did already happen, and it did through everybody in an unknown space, a space in which all rules and all behaviour patterns we have learned seem to be somewhat ridiculous. To quote the publication by Szuper Gallery on the work *Étant Ballet*:

“It begins with the aftermath of an incident, an explosion. A group of people run ashore an unexpected landscape. Everything is about to happen, but nothing seems to have changed. How might the alterations to the organic world, the world of matter might

affect them? The setting: a mystical landscape, a crash site, in the wild or in the rush of a blackout. Pulling apart the ‘ballet’ of the food system in short scenes and absurd narratives the performance deconstructs the simple act of living.”<sup>2</sup>

To refer to Fredric Jameson’s claim, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism in our consumer societies.<sup>3</sup> The melancholy in this work by Szuper Gallery reflects the momentary situation. A utopian “beyond capitalism” one just cannot imagine.<sup>4</sup> But I would like to go back in bit in time and space to question the problem of our lost utopia in relation to communities and our possibility to act as community.

There was, especially after the collapse of all socialist systems in the former Soviet Union, a strong urge by leftist cultural producers and post-Marxist philosophers<sup>5</sup> to reconsider their thinking on notions of community without following a reductive path of (a neo-liberal or morally conservative) communitarianism and to define other, new possibilities, and to open up new spaces of thought, even if there might be a melancholic undertone in some considerations. After the breakdown of the so-called socialist systems, it became clear that the revolution had eaten up its children; instead of freeing human beings as equals, again something else has happened. Therefore,

communities produce finalization gestures and exclusions towards the outside and homogenization within—as a sociological definition would emphasise. The contemporary philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy stated even much more drastically with respect to the former socialist countries: “That the justice and freedom—and the equality—included in the communist idea or ideal have in effect been betrayed in so-called real communism is something at once laden with the burden of an intoler-

able suffering (along with other, no less intolerable forms of suffering inflicted by our liberal societies) and at the same time [...] favour resistance to this betrayal.”<sup>6</sup>

But not only is the issue of communities as excluding to the outside and homogenising in the inside seen as problematic, but also the figure of an autonomous subject position has been under attack for a long time. Especially feminist thinkers, such as Jacqueline Rose<sup>7</sup>, Kaja Silverman<sup>8</sup>, Sigrid Schade,<sup>9</sup> and Judith Butler<sup>10</sup> have deconstructed the subject position as a subject in the central position in the world as a *fata morgana*.

Using Freud and Lacan to claim a feminist position, they deconstructed any fixed gender position as something illusory. Gender and the made-up attributes are something conceived through language not nature. Furthermore, initiated in the constitution of a subject in a very early age, the small child sees itself as a whole, closed image and starts to misinterpret itself along these lines. In spite of recognising oneself as a split, already spoken entity, a bundle of drives, thoughts, urges, and orders, one imagines oneself as a being that is in charge, in control of oneself and the surroundings. So, as the misconception of oneself is based on the projection of a perfect and complete image, it initiates the imaginary register (in Lacan’s terms) of a given subject or entity.

In an article I have written together with Lars Gertenbach, we argue that this illusory closure is also in charge when communities are constructed; the modus of identification does not only work through words and slogans (which would mean in a Lacanian terminology the Register of the Symbolic), but also in the modus of an illusory whole image–based on the illusion of a whole, perfect image of a subject.

“Thus,” argues theoretician Thomas Bedorf, “defining the notion of community by reference to an identity which produces exclusions. It is for this reason that the new thinking of community (by Blanchot, Nancy, Esposito) must seek to avoid such proximities. It can achieve this by ascribing to that notion the contours of an impossibility: by speaking of the ‘unavowable’ (Blanchot), the ‘unrepresentable’ or ‘challenged’ (Nancy), the ‘dialectical’ community (Esposito). Notwithstanding the differences in detail, a common intention unites these proposals to think community not as an entity (by whatever historical name it may be called: people, nation, culture, class) but as relation.”<sup>11</sup>

It is in this sense that the famous notion of “Being-Singular-Plural” by Nancy,<sup>12</sup> and his re-reading of the term “being-with” originally coined by Heidegger,<sup>13</sup> was of such big interest for all cultural producers and political subjects. “Being-with” is a situation in which a “human being” finds itself; being with others is what constitutes a human being, it is its condition to come into the world—to put it in simple words.

Nancy endeavours to show that, even beyond the boundaries of a concrete (ontic) community, on the more fundamental ontological level we are granted a “being-with” that exists not only “beneath” all respective communities, but also even before we are subjects. To circumvent the usual juxtaposition between the individual and the communal, as well as classical concepts of identity and subject, Nancy reverts to the “singular/plural” dichotomy that, in his view, expresses more clearly that these two terms have to be thought of as interlinked. When, in his work *Being Singular Plural* (2000), he accordingly attempts to develop “being-with” as a fundamental prerequisite of existence, this accordingly implies “that the singularity of each is indissociable from its being-with-many and *because*, in general, a singular-

ity is indissociable from a plurality".<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Nancy brings into the discussion not only the moment of birth, but also the moment of death, as something that defines "community" profoundly if we try to reconsider the notion of community from scratch: "A community is the presentation to its members of their mortal truth [...]. It is the presentation of the finitude and the irredeemable excess that make up finite being: its death but also its birth, and only the community can present me my birth, and along with it the impossibility of my reliving it, as well as the impossibility of my crossing over into my death."<sup>15</sup>

From a Lacanian perspective, he refers to the register of the "Real" in a subject constitution: the lack, the split, the thread of vanishing, the imperfect and shattered.

So now we have a concept of community that is in a condition of "inoperativeness" ("désœuvrement"), borrowed from Blanchot by Nancy (Nancy 1991). Blanchot used this term in the sense of interruption, non-consummation, and intentionlessness: no project follows from the discussion; a community is not objectifiable and not institutable. Nancy applies this to the concept of community in the sense that this fundamental community cannot be realized—or put into operation—on the social and political (i.e. ontic) level. It remains unimplementable in the sense that it cannot be realized or represented (Nancy 2001/2007).

Now we have an inoperative community and we have a human being, whose status is more than precarious. How could we think about any political action, any political articulation together with these concepts? And what does political mean in the context of the arts? Oliver Marchart has claimed recently in a talk in Zürich<sup>16</sup> that decidedly what makes art political must be political criteria, not artistic ones.

Acting politically according to Marchart means acting collectively as the first condition.

Acting politically means acting in an organised way – as a second condition.

Acting politically means acting strategically (third condition).

Acting politically means acting conflictually (forth condition).

These four criteria of **collectivism**, of **organisation**, of **strategy**, and of **conflictuality** – constitutes the nucleus of the political, the minimal condition of political action, if we follow Marchart.

Why collectivity, he asked?

One cannot act as a single person, rely on others to act, get together to act; one has to create some sort of collectivity to be an actual subject of a particular political act.

Why organisation?

Without mutual organisation one cannot claim an influence in a system; one has to have a shared political goal, and one needs a strategy to circumvent institutional impediments—this he sees also as an intrinsic part of becoming political, nobody acts in a political vacuum.

Political action is in itself conflictual, otherwise one would reach goals without obstacles, without strategy and without organisation. It is fundamentally interested and positioned.

These are now two very different notions, and both of them are convincing.

Actually, in a meeting with Jean Luc Nancy in a workshop in Zürich,<sup>17</sup> he was asked by Oliver Marchart why he did not deal with the problem of hierarchies and power relations in his notion of community and of being singular/plural. Nancy answered that he was just not so interested in this problem, and in his presentation it seemed that he was obviously more interested in transcendental ideas of the notion of "being-with"—a "being-with" that would in that sense include animals, plants, and even material objects.



I would like to open up Marchart's apodictic and slightly dogmatic demands, because while I agree with his standpoint for being positioned—for taking up a case—I would ask for a more subtle understanding. For example, with Brechtian theatre one could ask oneself what is more important, the content or the V-Effect: an interruption—this disturbing moment when the visitors are recognising that they are just in a theatre, not absorbed in the play; the illusion provided by the imaginary function is made impossible by the V-Effect. I would say, both are important but not always both parts have to happen on an equal level, or be of equal importance. Oliver Marchart claims for political art to make antagonism visible and to present platforms where this could happen. Art in his view can then only become political when it acts in the four paradigms—**collectivism, organisation, strategy, conflictuality**—when it is informed by the notion of antagonism as developed by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. I agree, but again I would like to argue that furthermore there are possibilities for art that could be derived from Nancy's philosophical approach. In a way, one could claim for an art practice which is informed by that notion of "being-with" a certain subtlety, thinking of a community as something without a project, without an articulation and maybe not without an interest, but more of an interest into singular/ plural co-beings. In a way, one could get something like an utopian perspective that contains the promising idea of a overall proximity, a closeness, an intimacy—and which also points to the problematic of any given community. This makes me think for example of dinners for and by women all over the world initiated by Suzanne Lacy alongside the more famous and more outspoken sculpture *dinner party* by Miriam Shapiro, a topic which Elke Krasny is researching in depth right now. This makes me think about practices, which form more hidden bonds, which create strange and ephemeral projects and products, like the many get-togethers by Fluxus Artists. This makes me think of practices, which disturb exactly that imaginary register that installs images of pseudo-communities inside a subject and which creates images of whole subjects. It makes me think of distrusting big organisations. It makes me think of acting in weird ways—in ways that would not end up in organisations but could be projecting other existences without a formulated agenda. Being connotated as a woman, which denies me in a Lacanian sense being a subject anyway, makes me embrace my otherness. It makes me think of accepting my own strangeness, my own weirdness and share this with others—temporarily as we know.

To quote from Foucault: "[T]here is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations."<sup>18</sup>

In this way, I would see art and cultural production also involved in this field of power relations with the possibility to speak from a special space of representation, a place that can be seen as a battle ground of ideological representations.

And I would like to end with a quote by Björn Etzold from an article in this issue on communities, "Being-With" of OnCurating<sup>19</sup>. Etzold came to the conclusion: "that Marx' thinking of practice gives up both the Aristotelian distinction between *praxis*, *theoria* and *poiesis* (because all of them become a form of practice) and the Greek distinction between *bíos* and *zoé*, which carried such importance for Arendt (as well as later for Agamben). Practice is production of life. The modern era produces life. Unlike Arendt, Marx is not concerned with re-inventing the old Greek valuation of practice in this context and re-prioritizing the political over the social question, but rather with a *new thinking* of practice on the basis of these conditions. He conceives of it as a practice of articulation through which individuals create each other and which derives its "poetry" exclusively from the future."<sup>20</sup>

**For further reading we would like to provide a list of consulted literature:**

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# DUSAN MURIC LEARNING CENTER

ex KIRIAKOS HADJIOANNOU LEARNING CENTER (2013)  
ex SAN KELLER LEARNING CENTER (2012)

ARTIST-IN-RESISTANCE 2014: Dušan Murić (Serbia)



HERZLICH WILLKOMMEN im DUSAN MURIC LEARNING CENTER\*. Dies ist ein Ort fürs lernen, Erfinden und Austauschen von Ideen, die über das kapitalistische Denken hinaus gehen, finanziert durch Kulturgelder kapitalistischen Ursprungs. Alle sind eingeladen, dieses Projekt mitzugestalten. Mehr INFORMATIONEN finden Sie unter [www.notmylab.org](http://www.notmylab.org). Jedes Jahr ist ein schlauer Kandidat/ eine schlaue Kandidatin zu einer 2-wöchigen ARTIST-RESISTENCY auf diesem Stück Land eingeladen. Danach trägt das LEARNING CENTER den Namen dieser Person für ein Jahr. Das Bewerbungsverfahren für 2015 läuft!

\* Der Name LEARNING CENTER ist ein ironischer Kommentar auf Bildungsinstitutionen wie z.B. Ecole Learning Center oder Harvard Campus, getragen von kapitalistischen Unternehmen und Interessen, u. a. der Aneignung von geistigem Eigentum. Dieses Projekt versucht, derartige und ähnliche Logiken zu unterwandern. Die Idee entstand während dem Festival BELLUARD BOLDWERK INTERNATIONAL 2012, im Rahmen der Rahmenproduktion NOT MY PIECE von MARTIN SCHICK (CH).

BIENVENUE au DUSAN MURIC LEARNING CENTER\*. C'est un lieu d'apprentissage, de la création et le partage des idées pour une vie au-delà du capitalisme, financés par l'argent de la culture d'origine capitaliste. C'est une espace ouverte, tout le monde est invité à participer en contribuant ses idées et son savoir. Plus d'informations: [www.notmylab.org](http://www.notmylab.org). Chaque année, une personne maligne est invité à faire un ARTISTE-RESISTENCY sur ce site pendant 2 semaines. En suite, le centre d'apprentissage porte le nom de cette personne pour 1 an. La demande pour 2015 est maintenant en cours!

\* Le nom LEARNING CENTER est un commentaire ironique sur les lieux d'enseignement habilités par les entreprises capitalistes, comme le Ecole Learning Center ou Harvard Campus (s.e.), au service de l'appropriation la propriété intellectuelle et d'autres intérêts capitalistes. L'objectif de ce projet est de renverser et mettre en question cette logique. Il s'agit d'un projet libre, et n'est pas censé être artistique, ni divertissant. Il a été introduit dans le cadre de la production NOT MY PIECE au cours de la Belluard Festival Boldwerk International 2012 par MARTIN SCHICK (CH).

WELCOME to the DUSAN MURIC LEARNING CENTER\*. This is a place for learning, creating and sharing ideas for a life beyond capitalism, financed by capitalist culture money. Feel free to PARTICIPATE by contributing your ideas and know-how. More INFORMATION: [www.notmylab.org](http://www.notmylab.org). Every year a smart person is invited to do an ARTIST-RESISTENCY on this site during 2 weeks. Then, the learning center bears the name of that person for 1 year. The application for 2015 is now open!

\* The name LEARNING CENTER is an ironic comment on education places empowered by capitalist enterprises, such as Ecole Learning Center or Harvard Campus (s.e.), serving the appropriation of intellectual property and other capitalist interests. The aim of this project is to reverse and challenge this logic. This is a free project, it is not supposed to be artistic, nor entertaining. It was first introduced in the frame of the production NOT MY PIECE by MARTIN SCHICK (CH) during the FESTIVAL BELLUARD BOLDWERK INTERNATIONAL 2012.



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Szenenwechsel



"To engage oneself in projects that are known to be unrealizable but desirable, and to seek to convince others to also engage in such projects, turns the project a little less unrealizable."

# Between Utopia and Reality

## The Martin Schick Learning Centre / NOT MY LAB

### by Agustina Strüngmann

Since 2007 Swiss performer and choreographer Martin Schick has been directing his own theater performances that use both research and participation to raise questions about the limits and possibilities of the performing space. More recently, *NOT MY PIECE - Post-capitalism for beginners* (2012) became the starting point for extending Schick's questions into the realm of an enduring space.

This essay will look briefly at Schick's earlier work and then consider the more recent *NOT MY PIECE* and its elaboration into *The Martin Schick Learning Centre / NOT MY LAB*.

In all of his works Schick carries out research that then becomes the basis for his work. The audience's participation becomes the final ingredient. For instance, in *X MINUTES* (2014) performed together with François Gremaud and Viviane Pavillon, the artists critically investigate the logic of the art market, and its neoliberal economics of exponentially increasing value - 'More is more! According to the contemporary art market we could claim that the more well known, the more expensive and the more expensive, the more valuable'. Research into the art market underlies the piece. The artists start the piece with a length of five minutes, and they add five more minutes onto each successive piece. Next, they bring the audience into the experience by inviting it to buy each performance and define the length of each piece. For each piece they hold an auction where members of the audience buy the performance. The interesting part is that so far the buyers of the piece have been curators and theatre directors who then become collaborators and co-producers. The artists sign contracts with the buyers and the collaborator – or buyer – is then named in the touring of the piece.

Schick's anti-establishment evolution is apparent in much of his work before *The Martin Schick Learning Centre / NOT MY LAB*. For instance, Schick has collaborated with Swiss artist Vreni Spieser in *Candide and Cunegonde* (2012), a performance where – for eight days - they occupied a small garden cottage in a public garden in Fribourg. They had daily discussions with different local groups and prepared small revolutions that would happen in the public space. Schick's work overall tone is anti-institutional and reflective. He reflects on the role of the artist in our capitalistic society, encouraging artists to employ different strategies to remain independent. In *HOLIDAY ON STAGE* (2013), a collaboration with Damir Todorović, the artists present themselves as contemporary upper class artists who are against the idea of becoming a serving class. Also, as noted earlier, in *X MINUTES* the artists sell each performance to someone in the audience.

Schick encourages participation, asking the spectator to think of new economic systems, to question what these would look like, and to ask how we would

live without capitalism. Even the performance name *NOT MY PIECE* and the centre's name *NOT MY LAB* explicitly state the artist's letting go of authorship and accepting collaboration with the audience.

Schick's performance *NOT MY PIECE - Post-capitalism for beginners*, which was selected by the Swiss Contemporary Dance in 2013, was first presented by Schick and Kiriakos Hadjiioannou in 2012 at the Belluard Bollwerk International Festival in Fribourg, Switzerland. The performance stages a pessimistic scenario of bank bail-outs, the collapse of economies, unemployment, meltdowns in major financial institutions, and an on-going war in which it is easy to see that the world will only get worse. For Martin Schick, the capitalist system could collapse from one day to the next.<sup>1</sup> Envisioning the end of capitalism, the artist introduces the audience to the idea of experiencing a 'socio-political science fiction' or a life without capitalism - a utopia.



The theatrical event became crowdsourcing for a planned research centre. The play was the starting point for a long-term project: *The Martin Schick Learning Centre / NOT MY LAB*, a piece of land that is an open and enduring stage.<sup>2</sup>

During the performance, new alternatives to capitalism are proposed and it is announced that these will be further discussed and implemented at *The Martin Schick Learning Centre*. Schick involves the audience of *NOT MY PIECE* by inviting them to be the learning centre co-sponsors and members. The Centre gives a continuation and a social dimension to the performance *NOT MY PIECE*, and *NOT MY PIECE* gives the learning centre a place where audience and ideas will interact. The learning centre project emerges in this way as a narrative device that allows the performance piece to continue out into the future.

That future – *The Martin Schick Learning Centre* - was inaugurated outside the Belluard Bollwerk International Festival, Fribourg in July of this year. The project is located outside the institution, as most socially engaged artistic projects are.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the learning centre is supported by Fondation Nestlé pour l'Art, which underscores the artist's dependence on the system. It also furthers to conceit. The artist is using the money of the system to question the system, adding to the project's ironic and provocative quality, but also undercutting its power as an



independent production. This differs from other cases in which the artist inevitably loses independence when private money is involved.

Schick envisions The Centre as a long-term project, spanning 99 years. The time frame reflects the time on Schick's land ownership permit. The only aspect that appears immutable is the time frame. All else is temporary. The Centre, for example, was initially called *The San Keller Learning Centre* to honour the Swiss artist San Keller for his dedicated mentorship in the project's development phase. During 2013–2014 the centre changed its name to *Kirakos Hadjiioannou Learning Centre*, crediting the Greek artist who was at that time undertaking the 'Artist in Resistance' programme and collaborating in *NOT MY PIECE*. After its inauguration the centre changed its name once again to *The Martin Schick Learning Centre*, to credit Serbian performance artist who is now collaborating with Schick in the 'Artist in Resistance' programme.<sup>4</sup> For now, it appears that Centre's name is subject to change according to the current artist in resistance. With the 'Artist in Resistance' project, Schick is calling for a resistance to the system in a piece of land. Instead of a name being identified by an institution, the project becomes personified by the artists, a sharply different alternative to in-residence programmes inside the institution. There is an actual open call for artists next resistance at the project's website.<sup>5</sup> The website of the learning centre reads:

'*NOT MY LAB* is a non-profit, non-political, non-state, non-hierarchical organization.

It is an institute for post-capitalistic themes with role models for a life after capitalism. It shall become a meeting point for people who have fallen out of the system or who wish to do so. It shall be accessible to all members (cooperative principle) and have regular opening hours for visitors'.

'A laboratory for learning, creating and sharing ideas, often called church of the future'

But is it an institute at all? One of Schick's aims for the learning centre is to comment on the capitalist learning centres such as the Rolex Learning Centre in Lausanne, Switzerland and the Novartis Learning Center Horburg in Basel, Switzerland - a reflection of the private sector's increasing intervention in the education sector. The artist is playing with the word institute, parodying such learning laboratories with impressive architectural designs, and extensive libraries. We could say that Schick's notion of an institute is related to Andrea Fraser's argument that today it is not a question of being against the institution, but the fact that "we are the institution".<sup>6</sup> I think this is Schick's intention. Unlike the Rolex Learning Centre, *The Martin Schick Learning Centre* is precarious and basic. It fosters the idea of being out in the field, a 'back to basics' exploration. Contrasting the sleek institutions of the city, the centre provides a form of isolation outside capitalism.

For its opening in July Martin Schick and Dušan Muric constructed the learning centre as a geodesic dome, a partial-spherical wooden shell structure developed by the neo-futuristic architect Buckminster Fuller. The artists covered the wooden structure with colourful umbrellas; making it look like a rounded tent. The geodesic dome proposes an alternative form of living that takes into account sustainability, energy savings and material efficiency. Historically, this type of building has been shown to have many practical disadvantages and the structure's impractical nature quickly becomes apparent. Therefore the actual structure of the learning centre is symbolic: the constructed geodesic dome is an alternative way of living, a structure



that in reality is ineffective, but will nonetheless host workshops on post-capitalism, a basic structure is enough to meet and exchange ideas.<sup>7</sup> The gatherings are focused on discussions of possible alternatives to capitalism. What do people learn at the Centre? Participants would also learn from each other on how to prepare for a life without capitalism. These skills might be community gardening or other energy saving practices. The learning centre will act as a communal space where people can learn how to be self-sufficient and independent from the capitalistic system. The modest wooden structure and the idea of using it as a gathering place, recalls Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* (2002), a collaborative and participatory project constructed outside the principal venues of *Documenta 11*. It too aimed at providing a gathering space where workshops were held, knowledge and information was imparted and people socialized. In its very structure it was outside the system.



The learning centre is 'accessible to all members', intended to become a meeting point for people who have fallen out of the system or who wish to. It is first addressed to the audience of *NOT MY PIECE*, but it is also open to anyone who would like to participate. To participate in the project people can inform themselves of what is happening on the website. The project encourages participation in making the audience question the system and think about other possible systems. It asks participants to be irritated. It invites those interested to go to the centre and work on a topic for a week or two. The Centre's first workshop on sustainability, *Sustainably different?* took place in November 2014. Others are expected to follow. With this cooperative principle of including the audience, we can see Schick turning to the social sphere, rather than remaining only in the field of performance.

The learning centre can be seen as a conceptual structure, an evolving elaboration of a world without capitalism, a utopia. Considering Thomas More's definition of utopia, as the island of good social order, a utopia is a community or society possessing perfect qualities, a hope for a better future, a conceptual 'no-place', beyond ordinary life. But what would a society without capitalism look like? That is uncertain, a topic for discussion and one that Schick sees happening at the Learning Centre. Schick's utopia: a life without capitalism entails a critique to the present situation.<sup>8</sup> What is not utopian about the learning centre is that it offers partici-

pants a place to talk, exchange and reflect on how we use time, how much time we dedicate to ourselves and how we could be self-sufficient and satisfy our basic needs. The learning centre's platform would act as a space for reflection.<sup>9</sup>

Theodor W. Adorno has remarked that achieving a utopia is not impossible. In his 1964 essay in conversation with Ernst Bloch he writes that certain utopian dreams had already been fulfilled - the television, the possibility of travelling to other planets and the ability to travel faster than sound.<sup>10</sup> He continues by saying that whatever utopia is, whatever can be imagined as utopia, it is the 'transformation of the totality', and he argues that nowadays people have lost the capability to imagine this totality as something completely different. Schick does exactly that by encouraging the audience to collectively think about a society without capitalism, a total change, something completely different to today's European reality. His work calls for an alternative universe of utopian possibility. Furthermore, Schick aims at materializing this utopia: making the project practical and real. Schick proposes workshops to reflect on his ideal scenario, and to learn sustainable practices.

The project provides a space to interact and collectively think about questions that are worth thinking about. Others might argue that Schick's commitment to maintaining an aesthetic utopian space for years in a site that could be put to "real use" offers an example of its aesthetic uselessness. I disagree. Projects that reflect on social issues are also useful and might also have great consequence. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Schick is reflecting on a life without objects, on a life where we would only have to satisfy our basic needs, in Switzerland, a place where objects are plentiful and where needs are generally met. The artist directs these questions to a specific audience that shares a set of acquired schemata, sensibilities, dispositions and taste or what Bourdieu described as *Habitus*, the social body. These same ideas would be perceived much differently in countries where the system has collapsed and extreme poverty is the norm. The irony of the piece could be misunderstood and it could even be offensive to some.

*The Martin Schick Learning Centre's* utopian vision is clearly artistic, detached from any practice that would relate to an NGO or projects that work in conjunction with government agencies, community activists.<sup>11</sup> The project provokes, and makes the audience think. We could see Schick's learning centre a utopia but also as an ironic, on-stage experiment, an extension of his performance work that invites the audience to reflect but also to participate in workshops to make a utopian vision less utopic. As Lars Bang Larsen remarked, it is this utilitarian aspect that gives the work a sense of purpose and direct involvement.<sup>12</sup> Martin Schick is turning social collaboration into an extension of his performance practice. It is in line with theater director Bertolt Brecht's conception of the *Epic Theater*, as surpassing entertainment and leading to social action. For Jackson, performance art transcends its material conditions to aspire to social effects.<sup>13</sup>

The learning centre today stands very much as a mind journey, a visionary place to imagine what would be possible to develop in a piece of land. The on-going process makes it very much a work-in-progress that could be transformed. Schick's utopian scenario is meant to evolve. Thus, the learning centre becomes a kind of a time machine, a utopia in transformation. The project is unfinished. There are 97 years remaining, giving it much time to transform and evolve. It has a utopian vision but things will be done, projects will be fulfilled. It offers artists a hybrid, a space between utopia and reality.

## Notes

1 In his book *Dark Matter*, Gregory Sholette explains this same crisis scenario. Gregory Sholette, G., *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture, Marxism and culture*, PlutoPress, London and New York, 2011, 9.

2 Schick acquired a piece of land in his hometown of Fribourg, Switzerland. It is there that he has created *The Martin Schick Learning Centre / NOT MY LAB*.

3 Socially engaged artistic projects' objectives and outcomes vary within artists but they all share the belief of empowering collective action and sharing ideas. For Claire Bishop, "artists use social situations to produce dematerialized, anti-market and politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life". Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its discontents", *Artforum*, February 2006, 179.

4 Serbian artist Dušan Murić lives and works in Belgrade, Serbia. He performed in numerous drama and dance productions in Serbia and Montenegro, collaborating with authors such as Bojana Mladenović, Isidora Stanišić, Anja Suša, Petar Pejaković, Ister Theater or TKH. He has been a co-author and moderator for the interdisciplinary project *Mozart Or Z (of) ART* (2005-2006). He is a founding member of *Station, service for contemporary dance*, Belgrade.

5 To register and for further information about the project go to: <http://www.notmylab.org>

6 Andrea Fraser argues that: "the institution of art is internalized, embodied, and performed by individuals". Andrea Fraser, 'From a Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', *Artforum* 44: 1, September, 2005, 281.

7 In Claire Bishop words, these proposed participatory practices "re-humanize—or at least de-alienate—a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism". Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its discontents", *Artforum* Feb. 2006, 179.

8 The term Utopia was coined by Thomas More in 1516. Furthermore, Richard Noble describes two facets to the term utopia. On the one hand Utopia as 'a better place, a place in which the problems that beset our current condition are transcended or resolved, and on the other hand 'the negative vision of the contradictions and limitations that drive our will to escape the present situation, since imagining a better world implicates a critique to the present one'. In this sense utopian works are political. Schick is an example of this. This utopian impulse informs and animates contemporary art. 'It holds up a critical mirror to the world; a glass through

which the darkness of the future illuminates the present'. (Richard Noble, *Introduction// The Utopian impulse in Contemporary Art*, in *Utopias: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2009, 12-19).

9 Like *Utopia Station*, curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija at the 50th Venice Biennial in 2003, the learning centre is a gathering space that is open to social interaction and dialogue. The Station was also a place to stop, to talk and contemplate.

10 Theodor Adorno, *Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing*, in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*. Trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg. Studies in Contemporary Social Thought, Cambridge, MA, London, MIT Press, 1988, 3.

11 Examples to these projects include artist group Superflex's *Supergas* and *Guaraná Power* projects where members worked with 'disenfranchised' communities and sought to ameliorate their condition through locally situated interventions. Another example of 'productive social practice' could be Ala Plastica, an Argentinean artist collective that operates as an NGO as well as an artistic group, working in conjunction with government agencies, community activists, and scientists. Grant H. Kester, *The one and the many: Contemporary collaborative art in a global context*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011, 127, 141.

12 Lars Bang Larsen, 'Social Aesthetics', 1999, in Claire Bishop, *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, London, Whitechapel Gallery, 2006, 172.

13 Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, New York and London, Routledge, 2011, 29.

**Martin Schick** is a Swiss freelance performance artist currently living on the road. After a short career as a dancer, he studied theatre and performance at Bern University of the Arts, Switzerland. Since 2007 he has worked on scenic plays in the independent dance and theatre environment, and considers theatre a place of permanent transformation. He is interested in the awkward, the impure and the uneven, aiming to interfere with conventions and standardisations within theatre and everyday life.

Schick is currently focusing on a more generalist and spatial practice that includes exhibitions, text works and open formats. He is about to buy a military bunker in the Swiss mountains for a future Artist in Resistance program and is also designing a Learning Centre for post-capitalist ideas sponsored by the Fondation Nestlé pour l'Art. Within the coming year, with the support of the European network WEB he will realize several new cross-gender projects under the title Radical Living. He will be teaching and promoting a new training technique called Walkworks and is starting up a collective General Performances for spatial practices in Berne.

A selection of his internationally shown performances includes: TITLE (2009), awarded with the ZKB prize at Theaterspektakel Zürich; CMMN SNS PRJCT (2011), created for the Festival Freischwimmer 2011 and performed more than 80 times all over the world, such as Fringe Festival Beijing, tjcc Paris or Live Arts Capetown; NOT MY PIECE (2012), selected for the Swiss Contemporary Dance Days 2013 and PIFT 2014; HALF-BREADTECHNIQUE (2013), performed at Tanzquartier Vienna, Culturescapes 2013, Tanzwerkstatt Europa and WITS Johannesburg; HOLIDAY ON STAGE (2013) performed in Rencontres Chorégraphiques Seine-St.Denis, Julidans Amsterdam, and X MINUTES (2014), currently on tour.

**<https://martinschick.wordpress.com>**



# Lexicon

Together with postgraduate students in Curating, Silvia Simoncelli created a lexicon around the idea of community.

## Idiorrhythmy

Composed of idios (particular) and rhythmos (rhythm), the word, which belongs to a religious vocabulary, refers to any community that respects each individual's own personal rhythm.

Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together - Novelistic simulations of some everyday spaces, Notes for a lecture course and seminar at the College de France (1976-77)*, Columbia University Press, p. 22.

## Community (Eleonora Stassi)

Community is these days the last relic of the old-time utopias of the good society; it stands for whatever has been left of the dreams of a better life shared with better neighbours all following better rules of cohabitation. For the utopia of harmony slimmed down, realistically, to the size of the immediate neighbourhood. No wonder community is a good selling point. No wonder either that in the prospectus distributed by George Hazeldon, the land developer, community has been brought into focus as an indispensable, yet elsewhere missing, supplement to the good restaurants and picturesque jogging courses that other towns also offer.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 2000, p. 92

We may say that community is a short-cut to togetherness, and to a kind of togetherness which hardly ever occurs in real life: a togetherness of sheer likeness, of the us who are all the same kind; a togetherness which for this reason is unproblematic, calling for no effort and no vigilance, truly pre-ordained; a kind of togetherness which is not a task but the given, and given well before any effort to make it be has started.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 2000, p. 99-100

## Community (Silvia Converso)

"Because if instead of continuing to search for a proper identity in the already improper and senseless form of individuality, humans were to succeed in belonging to this impropriety as such, in making of the proper being-thus not an identity and an individual property but a singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity – if humans could, that is, not be – thus in this or that particular biography, but be only the thus, their singular exteriority and their face, then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable. Selecting in the new planetary humanity those characteristics that allow for its survival, removing the thin diaphragm that separates bad mediated advertising from the perfect exteriority that communicates only itself – this is the political task of our generation."

Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, University of Minnesota Press, p. 44

## Community building (Eleonora Stassi)

Sharing intimacies, as Richard Sennett keeps pointing out, tends to be the preferred, perhaps the only remaining, method of community building. This building technique can only spawn communities as fragile and short-lived as scattered and wandering emotions, shifting erratically from one target to another and drifting in the forever inconclusive search for a secure haven: communities of shared worries, shared anxieties or shared hatreds - but in each casepeg communities, a momentary gathering around a nail on which many solitary individuals hang their solitary individual fears.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 2000, p. 37

**Nomadic habits/ Settlement** (Eleonora Stassi)

Throughout the solid stage of the modern era, nomadic habits remained out of favour. Citizenship went hand in hand with settlement, and the absence of fixed address and statelessness meant exclusion from the law-abiding and law-protected community and more often than not brought upon the culprit's legal discrimination, if not active prosecution. While this still applies to the homeless and shifty underclass, which is subject to the old techniques of panoptical control (techniques largely abandoned as the prime vehicle of integrating and disciplining the bulk of the population), the era of unconditional superiority of sedentarism over nomadism and the domination of the settled over the mobile is on the whole grinding fast to a halt. We are witnessing the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK, 2000, p. 13

**Politics** (Adriana Domínguez Velasco)

Politics is not the exercise of power. Politics ought to be defined on its own terms, as a mode of acting put into practice by a specific kind of subject and deriving from a particular form of reason. It is the political relationship that allows one to think the possibility of a political subject(ivity), not the other way around. [p. 1]

If we return to the Aristotelian definition, there is a name given to the subject (*politês*) that is defined by a part-taking (*metexis*) in a form of action (*archein-ruling*) and in the undergoing that corresponds to this doing (*archesthai-being ruled*). [...] That (which) is proper to politics is the existence of a subject defined by its participation in contrarieties. Politics is a paradoxical form of action. [p. 2]

Politics is a specific rupture in the logic of *ofarche*. It does not simply presuppose the rupture of the "normal" distribution of positions between the one who exercises power and the one subject to it. It also requires a rupture in the idea that there are dispositions "proper" to such classifications. [p. 3].

Democracy is the regime of politics in the form of a relationship defining a specific subject.

The sign of the political nature of humans is constituted by their possession of the *logos*. [...] The essence of politics is dissensus. Dissensus is not the confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the manifestation of a distance of the sensible from itself. Politics makes visible that which had no reason to be seen, it lodges one world into another. [p. 7]

Rancière, Jacques. *Ten Theses on Politics*, in *Theory and Event*, Vol.5, Issue 3, 2001.

**Ethics** (Silvia Converso)

"There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: It is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality. But precisely because of this things become complicated; precisely because of this ethics becomes effective. Since the being most proper to humankind is being one's own possibility or potentiality, then and only for this reason (that is, insofar as humankind's most proper being –being potential– is in a certain sense lacking, insofar as it can not-be, it is therefore devoid of foundation and humankind is not always already in possession of it), humans have and feel a debt. Humans, in their potentiality to be and to not-be, are, in other words, always already in debt; they always already have a bad conscience without having to commit any blameworthy act."

Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, University of Minnesota Press, p. 30-31

**Whatever** (Silvia Converso)

"THE COMING being is whatever being. The Whatever in question here relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its being such as it is. Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal".

Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, University of Minnesota Press, p. 3

**Accessibility (to what is inaccessible)**

(Gili Zaidman)

The community, the community of equals, which puts its members to the test of an unknown inequality, is such that it does not subordinate the one to the other, but makes them accessible to what is inaccessible in this new relationship of responsibility (of sovereignty?). Even if the community excludes the immediacy that would affirm the loss of everyone in the Vanishing of communion, it proposes or imposes the knowledge (the experience, *Erfahrung*) of what cannot be known; that "beside-ourselves (the outside) which is abyss and ecstasy without ceasing to be a singular relationship.

Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* English translation copyright © 1988 by Pierre Joris and Station Hill Press P. 17

**Idyllic** (Agustina Strüngmann)

'Any space of human relations defined by an absence of conflict. (Note: idyllic, in the modern sense—'How idyllic!'—is recent. Littré: a short lyrical poem on a rural theme).

Idyll is not exactly the description of a utopia. Fourier's utopia doesn't eliminate conflicts, it acknowledges them (therein lies its great originality): it stages conflicts, and as a result succeeds in neutralising them. 'Idyllic', in contrast, as its etymology suggests, refers to a literary representation (or fantasmatization) of its relational space.

Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together - Novelistic simulations of some everyday spaces*, Notes for a lecture course and seminar at the College de France (1976–1977), Columbia University Press (New York, 2002), p. 88.

**Xeniteia** (Agustina Strüngmann)

'Key element of the ascetic doctrine of Ancient (Oriental) Christian monarchism = Changing country, expatriation, voluntary exile (xenon: foreign) = Peregrinatio (pilgrim): military origin, the period of time a mercenary spends in a foreign country. (But what if we each defined ourselves as, what if we all felt like mercenaries in the worlds we have to operate in: working dispassionately in the service of various causes that aren't our own, being perpetually dispatched by those causes into regions where we're foreigners?).

Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together - Novelistic simulations of some everyday spaces*, Notes for a lecture course and seminar at the College de France (1976–1977), Columbia University Press (New York, 2002), p.124.

**Autarky** (Agustina Strüngmann)

'A structure made up of subjects, a little ,colony' that requires nothing beyond the internal life of its constituents'

,Strong interdependence + zero extra dependence. Independence marks the boundary, and so gives the definition, the mode of being of the group. A group in a state of autarkic Living-Together – a sort of smug pride, a self-satisfaction (in the Greek sense of the word) that's fascinating to someone looking in from the outside.

Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together - Novelistic simulations of some everyday spaces*, Notes for a lecture course and seminar at the College de France (1976–1977), Columbia University Press (New York, 2002), p. 36.

# Søren Berner

## interviewed by Nadja Baldini

**Nadja Baldini:** In 2005 you started doing performances in various exhibition and public spaces. What is your background as a performance artist, and how does it motivate your practice?

**Søren Berner:** My activity already started in the 1990s. What drove me in the beginning was that I became aware of graffiti. I was living next to a train station and always saw what was painted on the trains and walls. I had the opportunity to get in contact with somebody who did graffiti, and suddenly I saw myself being up late, drawing sketches and going out in the night painting spots that I found needed another touch, needed a soul. But graffiti writing also has very clear boundaries – how the styles should be, how the outline should be – and I was very opposed to that. From the beginning, my goal was to break those boundaries. In 2001, my friends and I did a performance where we went to the subway station at rush hour with spray cans and elephant hats and started spraying while people were standing on the platform. But no paint came out; we just made the sound with our mouths – *pshshshhhhh* – and called it “Invisible Wholecar.” This was, let’s say, the first different interaction that probably carved the line for another way of using the public space. Starting from graffiti, I began to open my eyes to the public space in a completely different way. On one side, I moved away from the spray can; on the other side, I started using my body, and this is what you might call the “performative.” In 2002, I applied to the Art Academy in Amsterdam and got more into doing performances, but very few of my teachers understood what I was doing. In the ateliers, you would normally have paintings; one guy made video and another sculptures. I showed my teachers a rap text that I wrote, being dressed up as Superman. They could not understand it at all and had no clue why I was there. Some of the things were, of course, very different to what they considered art, but I now see that this was also due to their lack of knowledge. There had been a lot of stuff going on in the 1960s that was basically what I was doing without being aware of it. Luckily, I had two good teachers who saw this and gave me some good input.

**NB:** Your recent projects all take place outside the museum space and involve different audiences and communities. I’m thinking, for instance, of your three-week workshop with fifty children in Copenhagen last spring. What made you move away from the exhibition space and engage yourself in other contexts?

**SB:** Here again, I think, it is the opposite way around. I started outside the exhibition space and then found some entry into it. Having done this for more than fifteen years, I established relations with a lot of different galleries, off-spaces, and museums that invited me to exhibit my work. Exhibiting meant doing performances – rarely would there be anything to buy or anything other than leftovers to look at. Last spring the Nicolai Kunsthalle in Denmark invited me in connection with a project involving art and children, and my first reaction was to use the public space with the children. They were pre-school kids aged between four and six. I think the idea came from not being able to remember public space myself.

**NB:** What did you do with them?

**SB:** I created different stations, or perhaps you could call them workshops – I haven’t really found a word for it. I created different scenarios that took place in the public space. First, I took a big piece of wood, big enough for all the children to sit around it, and painted a very rough background, just a green landscape seen from above. Then I asked them to draw what it looks like where they live – some painted a house, a street, and a tree, whatever. The day after, I cut up the wood in similar small pieces, so each piece became abstract. When I asked them what they saw their imagination exploded. They saw everything in these small abstract wood pieces, and I recorded my whole conversation with them. Everybody picked the pieces he or she liked, and we built birdhouses out of them. Then we walked out into the public space, each with his or her birdhouse, to find spots that they liked and said: “Ok, we’ll hang them here,” or “I want mine up there,” so together with my assistant I was climbing trees to hang the birdhouses



up in all kinds of places in the city. I think we ended up having thirty-five of them hung up throughout the city. In that way, we were creating a walking path, and all the children would remember where they put their houses. This was one part of the workshops where we tried to play with, let's say, the awareness of public space. In another workshop, we would go and ring doorbells with the children.



**NB:** Isn't this something that children do anyway?

**SB:** But not at this age – they are not allowed to walk outside alone. I had printed out Google maps so we could look at the city again from above and look for backyards, and we would just go, ring door-

bells, and ask if we could come and play in people's backyards. We managed to get the key, get into the backyard, and even into one person's apartment and have lunch there. For the children it was absolutely no problem, but the two pedagogic assistants from the kindergarten got so embarrassed – no you can't do that, no no... – that it turned out a much greater experience for them than for the children. What I thought would be mind-blowing for the children was in fact mind-blowing for the pedagogues. They talked about it for days afterwards and told all their friends. One of the pedagogues who took photos of the action surprised me with a photo book printed in hard cover with a really nice layout consisting of a chronological photo series of the "Door bell backyard event." He showed it to me six days later, and of course that book became an important part of the process. I also had a copy sent to the friendly man who let the fourteen children dine in his living room. I guess it is hard to plan such things in advance. I created four or five different stations that all took place in the public space. I tried to play with the borders; not only of the outside but also the inside world, and I did that through questioning. I would ask them what is forbidden, for example, and they would say that you are not allowed to cut off the head of a police officer, that you cannot cross against a red light, and so on. So we would talk about what is forbidden and what is not forbidden in Denmark and in other places. When I asked them "What *can* we do?", they said "shopping," "buy food," or "cross on a green light," but mostly they would continue to answer the "what *can* we do" question with: "You cannot...put a bomb under a car,"

**NB:** You seem to be particularly interested in research and cooperation with scientists from other fields. On the one hand, you borrow scientific methods, create questionnaires, lead interviews, and produce knowledge; on the other, you take a critical standpoint towards the result orientation of exactly these methods by pleading for an open-ended process. How would you define your own artistic practice?

**SB:** I guess it's one way of producing so-called knowledge, or an attempt to produce knowledge. I like to take methods that are known in the scientific world or use a practice that they use, because this also creates a space for communication. I go into a field, as I went into graffiti, and take huge advantage of the freedom of not being a scientist or a graffiti writer. I use their methods for the production of what I call knowledge, but I don't stick to them, so

the outcome is completely different. For me it's a critical way of looking at how knowledge is produced and seeing where the problematics are, but I can also carve it into how things have to look like. So this is what I find interesting about working with scientists. Their knowledge inspires me, and I generally like to work with others rather than alone because I think it is the connection between people that creates sometimes a good, sometimes a bad feeling, but always an experience. When I work with people in a different field – not only science – I immediately start to question that field to see where the boundaries are. I think that is generally true for what I do. I like to work with people. I tried to sit in my own atelier and produce my own art, but it doesn't work for me.



**NB:** To which extent are you interested in the self-empowerment of the participants? What is “real” participation for you?

**SB:** This is a good question, as this is exactly what distinguishes what I do. It is definitely not about participants coming and fulfilling my idea of a concept, a performance, whatever. They are not my workers. They don't work for me, and I don't give them orders. This is very important to me. Otherwise it is not a participatory project for me; it would be my hiring people or just having an audience whom you don't pay, but who would do it for me, my self-ego. This is probably the breaking part of it – it would simply mean creating my own artwork by using people for it. Instead, it is about the process of working with people on the same level, even though we probably are at different stages, different places, but we should all benefit from it. Sometimes one benefits more than the other, or benefits from different things. But these things can also come back to you ten years later, and you benefit from them in a completely different way. Let me give you one concrete example. I'm very interested in the distinction between participatory projects that just create works

for the artist and participatory projects in their real sense, where you have participants participating in a project in which everybody has something to say and can bring in their ideas, and something might come out of it which may or may not be an artwork. That for me is real participatory art practice.

**NB:** How important is it for you to declare what you are doing as art?

**SB:** I have tried different ways, and I have done works where the people involved would not immediately notice that they are part of an art project. This had several reasons. First, it may have been, let's say, a test or a try-out where I wasn't sure myself if it would be an art project or not. So, I did stuff that afterwards turned out to be an art project, but the participants I worked with had no clue. I guess most of the time it is a very open process. But mostly when I work with participants it is with a mutual understanding that what will come out of it might in some way be an art product or an art practice.

**NB:** And what would be the role of the artist?

**SB:** I think I cannot define it. I cannot say what the role of an artist is, and I don't think it is my job to say what that role is. What I can say is that I constantly try to extend or break the boundaries of any field I'm working in. For example, in the current project at Baden, where we produce sounds and do interviews with the students, I go – maybe in a philosophical way – into questions as to what the conditions of producing radio are. When can we call it radio, when can you not call it radio? Is it only radio when it is broadcast over the air or as a podcast? When do we have to use other terminology to talk about auditive works?

**NB:** What about the socio-political aspects of your work? Do you expect your artistic work to have a changing impact on society?

**SB:** I think it is out of the question that it has an impact, but what kind of impact it has will always have to be seen afterwards. It is a very good question, but it is also a very difficult question, because I guess I couldn't do anything if there would be no impact. If you look at it in a very strict way, I would say that there is an impact in everything you do. When I get the time to read art history, I can see that some works had an impact fifty or a hundred years later, so it is not for me to answer that question. Anything you do has an impact on something else, at least that

is how I see it. I expect all the things that I do to have some impact – on me, on society, or on a system outside of my own.

**NB:** In view of the increasing commodification of knowledge and education, where and how can art develop a critical potential?

**SB:** The critical, political potential has always followed and inspired me, from political philosophy to critical political standpoints and actions. I grew up in a very left-wing collective in a huge house, a commune with ten parents and I don't know how many kids. My mother would carry me to demonstrations in support of houses that were going to be torn down. That is the childhood memory that I have, with very active people from the circus - I even joined the circus group at different festivals or street shows as a six-year-old - from the art scene and a lot of Communists living in our house. That definitely had an impact on me. I lived there until I was nine, and then we moved to the countryside, which was very different, but at least for these first nine years I grew up in a very leftist, Marxist-inspired environment, and when I look back now I have to admit that a lot of those thoughts, a lot of my passion, a lot of my beliefs come from that. There is no question that this played a very important role for me. From graffiti I quickly went into writing political statements on walls, doing political acts in the public space, writing what I thought was wrong with society in a political sense. So this has always followed me.

**NB:** Are there particular people or projects that have inspired you?

**SB:** I did some actions with the Voina Group, the Russian street artist group, and with the Yes Men, whose work is very political. There are many projects that inspire me. The Danish artist group Superflex have done very interesting projects, especially the project they did in collaboration with the guarana farmers' cooperative in the Brazilian Amazon. They wanted to produce a guarana power soft drink and ended up fighting with big brands like Coca Cola who own the monopoly. They are very good graphic designers and put up sort of a little guerrilla fight against these giants. For another project in a village in Tanzania they built huge orange balloons that served as toilets. The methane gas that was produced was used for cooking and making the households self-sufficient, and afterwards the artists managed to transport these huge orange balloons filled with shit into the museum. The consequential performances

by Tino Seghal also inspire me. The very strict way he proceeds, not leaving any trace, only doing oral contracts, is an interesting path to choose. I am also very fond of Ryan Gander. My most political activities, however, I keep to illegal activities and, of course, I cannot put my name on these. So, they might not always be straight in the arts. Pussy Riot is a good example. They did a concert and went to jail, to work camps, really horrible. This is in a Russian context where you have to do something more, but I also did stuff for which I would get a prison sentence here in Europe. Sociologist Niklas Luhmann has inspired me a lot, even though I probably only understand five percent of what he wrote. Still, I have read his "System Theory," and the way he talks about systems has at least forced me to think differently. You could say he disturbed my system so that I started to look at things in different ways. In general, philosophy and sociology have always played an important role in my practice.



### Captions

1–3 Søren Berner, „Workshop“, Winterholiday – Live Art for Kids, Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen, 2014. Photo: Henrik Harder Bak (pedagogue).

4 Performance by Søren Berner, „Samtalekøkkenet“ (Kitchen Talk), Nikolaj Kunsthal, Copenhagen 2013, Photo: Mikkel Mortensen

5 Søren Berner, „Father i should have listened“, Performance and Installation, Helmhaus, Zürich, 2012. Photo: Courtesy of the artist



The Danish artist **Søren Berner** (b. 1977) works on the interface between visual art, performance, music, and activism. He has realized numerous performances in public spaces and participatory projects in Zurich, Vienna, and Copenhagen. His works are characterized by a critical reflection on the process of research and knowledge production and, at the same time, stand out through an improvised and actionist way of intervention. Søren Berner is currently working on a radio project with young students at a vocational school in Switzerland. In collaboration with the musician Balint Dobozi, they together produce sounds and interviews in which they reflect on their work and everyday realities and share their dreams, fears, and visions of the future. Søren Berner tries to open up new ways of agency through collective action and the critical examination of the conditions and institutions that shape us.

**<http://www.sorenberner.com/>**



# A conversation with Eyal Danon

## by Dina Yakerson

**Dina:** Please tell me about your activity in Jessy Cohen? How did the Jessy Cohen project begin and how did your physical transition into the neighbourhood occur?

**Eyal:** Everything started as a project which is no longer defined as a project now. In 2009, we offered the municipality of Holon an outdoor project, as part of the seventy-year celebration of the city, which was about to take place in 2010. We thought it was a good idea to use the budget for the celebrations, and we offered a one-year residency for artists to work in the city and create a big outdoor event. Apparently, the budget we requested was much bigger than the whole budget of the celebrations, so there was no money left for us. However, they said if we were going to focus on the neighbourhood of Jessy Cohen - there was a budget for that. The immediate reason for that was a big new wave of immigrants from Ethiopia—you know, the *Falash Mura*<sup>1</sup> immigration—who settled in the neighbourhood. It wasn't a result of city policy; it was a result of state policy. But the city had to deal with it, so they had a specific budget for that. But it's interesting that the city saw us as one of the relevant tools it had to deal with what was happening in Jessy Cohen. And what is happening in Jessy Cohen is a phenomenon that repeats itself throughout the last decades: in recent years, it's been the *Falash Mura* immigration, during the 90s it was immigration from the former Soviet Union, in the 80's Ethiopians again, in the 70's...

**Dina:** In fact, in every decade this was an immigrant neighbourhood?

**Eyal:** Yes, in every decade. The idea was that we would do a project for two years, throughout 2010 and 2011. We received a budget of 400,000 nis from the municipality, and we committed ourselves to raise the same amount. That's how we began the Jessy Cohen project, and nothing we thought would happen happened. Currently, it is

not a project anymore, because since we physically moved the whole Center into the neighbourhood it ceased to be a project. This transition is influencing everything the Center is currently doing.



**Dina:** When did you move? Was it your decision to stop the "project" and to actually move and become an integral part of the neighbourhood? Or was this a decision of the municipality?

**Eyal:** We moved on July 1<sup>st</sup> in 2012, into a building of an old school, a day after the school had closed. After about a year of working in the neighbourhood we understood that the two-year time frame is irrelevant. It took us almost a year—half of the project's time frame—just to meet with people and understand the neighbourhood. We made our own decision that, regardless of the city's funding, we would continue to work with the neighbourhood in the following years. We began contemplating the idea of actually moving the Center there. Then, we had a meeting with the CEO of the mayor and we told her we heard rumours that the school in Jessy Cohen was about to close, and if it did – we wanted to move in. At first she said she didn't think it would. But then, about a month before the school year ended, they made a decision to close the school, and the municipality gave us the option to move in.

And I have to say it is very interesting that our former location was also an old school which we

renovated and adapted into an art centre. In parallel, the municipality was about to open a new high school in the city, and they could have used the old school which had closed for that purpose, but they decided to give us the choice. Ultimately, our decision cost them more money.

**Dina:** Is this due to the fact that during those two years that you worked in the framework of a "project," they believed your work was valuable and that it had a good influence on the neighbourhood?

**Eyal:** The correct structure is that they nominate a head of a cultural institution and from that moment onwards they do not intervene in his decision-making. And that's how it worked with us from the very beginning. So I wouldn't say that they knew or currently know all the details of our activity and therefore that they cannot really evaluate the effect of our actions. I think there was a general consensus that having us inside the neighbourhood was the right thing to do, even if it's not based on real data. We also don't have the real data; our decision was not based on a clear evaluation of the effect our transition into the neighbourhood would have. This decision was mainly based on gut feeling.

**Dina:** How did this transition affect the activity of the Center?

**Eyal:** Our activity has changed – it is still in the process of changing. In the midst of the Jessy Cohen project, we began to re-evaluate and rethink the Center's activity. The Jessy Cohen project was a very direct, clear continuation of the Center's activity for years. But, at the same time, it was perceived by the outside as a U-turn, as a shift in direction. People were saying, "You used to be a political art space and now you're a social art space." It was very important for us to create linkage—a curatorial linkage between our previous projects, such as *Liminal Spaces* (a collaboration we initiated with the Palestinian Association of Contemporary Art and the Art Academy in Ramallah), and what we are currently doing in Jessy Cohen; to link this political and social aspect—because they cannot really be separated. One cannot separate the occupation, for example, or the policy that creates the occupation, from the policy that creates places like Jessy Cohen. It's the same source of policy that creates Jessy Cohen and the Neve-Shaanan neighbourhood in Tel Aviv. It's the same mechanism and the same source of power. So you cannot really make this separation unless you surrender, in advance, to the Israeli national division of Israelis/

Palestinians, Jews/Arabs. According to this dichotomy, collaborations and joint projects are simply impossible.

The Jessy Cohen project has influenced our curatorial work. It was clear, after about a year or so, that we have one program over there—in the previous building of the Center, and another curatorial program in the "shop"—the small gallery space we opened in Jessy Cohen. We had two curatorial programs and two different audiences. Our idea was to have projects that were exhibited in the shop of Jessy Cohen, exhibited also in the Center itself, in order to not create this kind of separation of audiences. The Center was perceived as a more "serious," prestigious (it's funny to use this word, you know what the place looked like) art space, and the shop was a small exhibition space for the community.



**Dina:** Who are your partners and collaborators inside the neighbourhood?

**Eyal:** At first, our main and only partner was the neighbourhood's community centre. Today we have what we call the "Jessy forum" —a forum that meets every six weeks. It contains our team from the Center, the people who work in the community centre, social workers, people working with youth at risk, the local youth movement, our FabLab, and the youth club—many representatives.

As long as we were not physically here, the projects were continuously happening—artist after artist. We tried to have longer projects, you know Meir (Tati), for instance, worked here for two years. So we constantly had someone working in the neighbourhood. But once we moved in, we had nothing - no projects. It took us almost a year to restart projects. Because it took us a year to really understand and re-evaluate our activity here. But the only thing that was still going on was that "Jessy forum," and I think for us it's a very important tool of working

within the neighbourhood—creating this kind of alliance.

**Dina:** Did this forum already exist or did you guys actually form this alliance?

**Eyal:** The participants of the forum were working in the neighbourhood way before us, and most of them didn't even know each other. So why was it that the art institution introduced this kind of cooperation? I think that we are the only partner in this alliance of disciplines that has no clear methodology. Everyone else who works in the neighbourhood in different fields comes to the neighbourhood with a very specific time frame, and they know what they are supposed to be doing. We know nothing. It is a weakness of course, because we have to really learn as we go along and make a lot of mistakes in the process. But at the same time, it gives us a lot of freedom. We have much more "free time," which is something that is lacking here. We have free time to offer all of the other partners to meet, a place for all of them to meet and so on.

**Dina:** However, you continue to curate and host exhibitions as you did before this transition. So how does your regular activity integrate within the activity in the neighbourhood?

**Eyal:** First of all, since we are physically here we are undergoing a process. We became another institution in the neighbourhood that is available for the residents of the neighbourhood. This doesn't mean that all of the exhibitions here have to do with the neighbourhood, as did the various socially engaged projects that we conducted here. We are a contemporary art institution and we have to do very good, professional, international contemporary art exhibitions. This is essential for us, and what we have to do now is to think how we reach out to our new public. In the previous place, we were completely alien, of course due to the fact that we didn't really make any effort to connect to our surroundings. But the fact remained that we were only communicating with an art audience. Since we moved here, we are communicating with another audience. It doesn't mean that we have to necessarily change our exhibition program. I think since we are dealing with social-political issues (the Center is always dealing with social-political issues) all the exhibitions are relevant to the people in the neighbourhood. The question is, first of all, how do we make them come? When they come, who meets them? Who speaks with them? And so on.



**Dina:** So how does this work now? What are the ways that you communicate the Center's projects and exhibitions that do not necessarily take place in the neighbourhood or deal with the neighbourhood to your new public in Jessy Cohen?

**Eyal:** We have a growing number of residents that we know personally from different activities that we have conducted. Before every exhibition, they receive a phone call from us, inviting them personally to the opening. We try to arrange guided tours in the exhibitions for the different groups registered in the community center. So, if you are going to an aerobics class in the community center, for instance, you are offered an opportunity to come on a specific date and time for a guided tour in the Center. Free of charge, of course.

**Dina:** It sounds promising, but do the residents of the neighbourhood actually come to your exhibitions?

**Eyal:** They come, I mean we're not talking about huge amounts, but they come. A lot of people still come around because they knew the school, and they don't really know what we are doing here, so they are curious. In general, our goal is that every guest will at least have a proper introduction to the exhibition and our activity. If there is time—usually during the week there is—the person working at the entrance takes visitors upstairs and talks to them about specific works.

**Dina:** As part of the attempt to connect with your new audience, do you have a new educational program that you are working on?

**Eyal:** I won't call it an educational program anymore. For example, since we moved here we hired another staff member whose role is defined as: "community outreach." What was defined before as



the Education Department has become this role, which is responsible for the connection to the local community. Everything that involves residents from the neighbourhood goes through this person. The idea is that he will know the residents, he will know our partners from the other institutions; he is a kind of moderator between us and the neighbourhood.

I'm jumping now to another subject, when we visited Cluster in London, we met a person who was titled a "walker-talker," and he was not an employee of the art organization. He was an employee of the council. His job is to walk the street, to know everybody, to see that everything is okay. Everyone knows him, and the art organization works a lot with this guy. So, the idea was to have this kind of "walker-talker" here, in Jessy Cohen. He is employed by us, but at the same he can be used by other people; they should know him, they can communicate through him.

**Dina:** Apart from really connecting the exhibitions to the residents, are you still continuing to initiate socially engaged projects as you have done before?

**Eyal:** Yes, after a year adjustment to the new situation, there are new projects. But in a way, they are longer than they used to be; the processes are longer, the implementation process is longer, because there is no deadline or time frame of two years. We are here to stay, and therefore we can allow this kind of long-term implementation. For example, we have the *Squeaking Symphony* project by Amnon Wolman and Dan Weinstein. They both work with a group of residents. It is not an original idea. There was an English composer who had the idea that anyone without a professional background can make music. So, this is a group of residents who play on anything, but they have to write their own scores, so it's not just improvisation. They started it before as a short-term project with a small group, and it concluded with a small concert. Many people who were interested in the project from the neighbourhood came to the concert and this is how the project grew. Now we are working on it for another year. It's a beautiful project, very simple but very meaningful for its participants.

Another example is the *Ford Fiesta* project. This is a different example, because the idea was that through a limited time frame one can touch on a lot of topics. The participating group works a little bit in the Fab-Lab, a little bit in computing—they touch on a lot of fields. The idea behind this is that it can evolve into long-term, specific activities in the future.

**Dina:** Whom do these mentioned groups include? Are they all residents of the neighbourhood? Do they have a certain age groups or similar backgrounds?

**Eyal:** The groups consist of residents. Only residents. Different ages, different backgrounds—mixed groups, of course. One of the things I learned here is that most of the activities in the neighbourhood are divided between Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians, which is something that we are trying to break. This division is not made solely by the municipality; it is also created by the Ethiopian community itself and by the neighbourhood's residents. But I think it leaves a very easy way out for the institutions. It is much easier to have two separate senior clubs, youth movements, and so on.

**Dina:** Can you describe other changes that the Center is undergoing during its transition into the neighbourhood?

**Eyal:** One of the most important changes that happened is a change of our self-perception. We are still, first of all, a contemporary art center, and we must be. We want to continue to be a professional, international, important contemporary art center, not because this is our goal, but because this is our tool; because our priorities have changed a bit since we began working in Jessy Cohen.

When we're talking about a neighbourhood alliance with other professionals and institutions working in Jessy Cohen, our unifying factor is that we all wish to influence the neighbourhood and continue to be relevant in the neighbourhood's life, as well as to Israeli society in general. In order to be relevant, each of the partners has their own tools. Our tool is very good programming and very good exhibitions; so that we don't lose our position within the art field, so that we won't become this kind of "community center," irrelevant art space. And The Israeli Center for Digital Art has this position, it has a good position within the Israeli art field and internationally. But we have to keep it this way because this relevance enables us the privilege of working in the neighbourhood from within the art field. Therefore, maintaining a good program is not our goal—it is our tool.

**Dina:** Can you elaborate more on your "glocal" perspective? What are you doing in practice, in order to maintain this broad overview of your practice, as well as connecting to similar worldwide practices?



**Eyal:** We talked a bit about the partnership in the neighbourhood, and I think we knew from the very beginning that we are looking for worldwide places with similarities. That was the reason we began working with Cluster, for example. With Cluster we formed a network consisting of eight art institutions, working in similar neighbourhoods. The logic behind this was that the work is similar, since the reasons why neighbourhoods like Jessy Cohen exist all over the world are not accidental—they are a result of policies. The goal is to develop an ability not to learn chronologically from the history of the same place, but to learn from what other, similar institutions are doing now. Not historically, but now. This enables us to bring into the neighbourhood a broad perspective. I think this also a privilege of being an art institution, unlike all the professionals working in the neighbourhood: we travel, we exchange ideas, residencies—we have this broad perspective. If you talk with a community worker or a social worker here, they don't have it. They are trapped in the local. So the main agenda is to develop this "local-global" outlook and to use it within our local activities.

We never view Jessy Cohen as an independent case. There are more neighbourhoods like that in Israel and all over the world. I think that one of our missions is to create this kind of connection between the neighbourhoods—again, to connect the social and the political as mentioned before. We strive to create another space in which Jessy Cohen and maybe some neighbourhoods in Bat-Yam and Neve-Shaanan in Tel Aviv can come together and overcome municipal borders. In this theoretical "space" we can create a connection between different populations that naturally do not communicate but have a lot in common. We do that on the global level with Cluster or the *Glocal Neighbors* project, and on a local level it should be done with the West Bank, with other neighbourhoods in Tel Aviv, and so on.



**Dina:** Is this your future goal—to instil this kind of collaboration between similar places, which are currently disconnected in Israel and worldwide?

**Eyal:** Yes. That's a goal that has to be set, because if you see Jessy Cohen as an isolated problem, you don't bring in your broad perspective and you don't make your actions political.

**Dina:** I agree with this theoretical part, but in practice, what does this mean? How can you actually create these connections?

**Eyal:** The "how" is very complicated, and it relies on the assumption that we are here for a long time. Because nothing of what I mentioned can be achieved in the short term. And then, for example, the kids that Mai (Omer) is working with now are teens between ages of thirteen and fourteen, and most of them are Ethiopians. If we are going to work with them in a long-term process—a year, let's say, gradually they will be able to meet with groups of refugee kids from Neve Shaanan and start working together. But this is a very slow, gradual process.

Another thing is that we have an information center within the public library of the community center, in which all the other neighbourhoods are represented as well. As part of this archive we are setting inside the public library, we are going to invite other projects from other neighbourhoods. This archive is going to be very active, in terms of having meetings there, screenings, presentations; it is going to be a part of the library system—everything will be researchable and accessible. It is important specifically because when you think of neighbourhood histories, such as Jessy Cohen, their histories are absolutely absent from the official library. If you go into Holon's public library and you search for Jessy Cohen, you will find a small box for a few letters. The history of this neighbourhood, as in other similar cases, is completely absent from the public domain. It exists solely in the private domain. Therefore, exposing this history, putting it in the public library, having it searchable in the library's catalogue, giving it a presence—is highly important for us.

**Dina:** How can you bridge the gap between an actual socially involved project in the "here and now" and its later representation in your art space in the form of an exhibition? Does this kind of representation have any value?

**Eyal:** I cannot give a general answer; there are no rules. I think that representation solutions are

completely linked to the projects. I can give an answer with an example of an exhibition we did last year, entitled *We Are Not Alone*. What we tried to do in that exhibition, which didn't always work, we tried to undergo a process with the participants in order to create a model and see if their models can be re-implemented here. The exhibition was in a way, slicing the project, showing just one stage of it. There was an initial project, which was implemented somewhere in the world, and our exhibition showed a representation/documentation of that project, but also explained how it is going to be implemented here, in the neighbourhood. With some projects, the exhibition showed the stages before the local implementation in Jessy Cohen, and in some cases, the exhibition was held during the implementation process. For example, Fritz Haeg showed his project *Edible Estates, the way it was done in Budapest and here*. The project here. That is one example of a solution to the representational issue.

I do agree it is very problematic to have these kinds of projects moving into the gallery, but I think we have to remember that an exhibition is still a powerful tool. Even if it is a very dull representation of a very good project, it is still valuable. I'm constantly repeating this, but I think working from the art field is a very good position to do things from. An exhibition is a tool we are working with. For example, I asked Fritz (Haeg), why were all the *Edible Estates* in the world initiated by an art festival or an exhibition? I mean, if you get funding for this project from somewhere else, the municipality, for instance—why do you need an art institution to launch the project? My own answer is that it is because this is a valid and important tool. First of all, it gives visibility to the project, enables the project in many cases, and because art budgets are much more flexible than others.

You know, artists are the biggest charlatans—we do biology, we do anthropology, we do science, and we do social practice. We do everything without learning any of it. So, it is a very flexible field, and this flexibility is important because it creates the conditions to work outside the art field.

**Dina:** But you are also expected to create this kind of visibility within the art field?

**Eyal:** You need to reflect it back into the art field, for legitimacy, for various reasons. But I agree that the form of an exhibition is a challenge. For example, in the project Mai is working on now, the question of what will be presented is a huge question. What we are considering now is converting the art

space into a workshop space, so that the exhibition will be almost a continuation of the process itself. But still, it will be an exhibition; it will be around for a limited amount of time, there will be a schedule, there will be an opening.



**Dina:** Is the municipal funding and the representation of these projects related? Meaning, is the need for an exhibition-type of representation also influenced by the fact that you need to produce something and to show "results" to the authorities that funded the projects? And if you make these projects visible in this manner, this increases your chance to receive further funding?

**Eyal:** It depends what the source of the money is.

**Dina:** Municipal funding, for instance?

**Eyal:** Of course, especially in the case of the Ministry of Culture. They really measure: How many exhibitions? What's their duration? How many publications? That's their criteria. Of course, the challenge in finding resources that are not coming only from the art world—this is where it all becomes more complicated. We are constantly trying to reach other resources of funding from different fields, and it's more complicated because our institution is an art institution. First of all, they examine who we are, and if we declare ourselves an art institution, then they ask, for example, "Why are you asking for money in order to help new immigrants?"

**Dina:** This is why there has to be a visible linkage to art?

**Eyal:** It is linked. It is one of the reasons for having exhibitions, but it's not the main reason. There are also some other ways to create representations: events, publications, etc. There should be something to conclude a project, something that shows that you spent the money and on what.

**Dina:** Does or can municipal funding influence the content of the projects?

**Eyal:** We don't have any interference in the contents. But obviously you can say that once the city gave us money to do a project in Jessy Cohen, they already influenced what we did. But at the same time, we could have said no.

**Dina:** Last but not least, what is the role of a curator in such socially engaged projects as you described?

**Eyal:** I cannot separate my role as curator, director, producer, moderator—it's all mixed. In a way, it's not just about curating an exhibition. In everything that we do here, we have to deal with a huge spectrum of practices. I find myself, for example, sitting in meetings in the municipality regarding a new construction plan for Jessy Cohen along with architects. So, I don't think I can limit my and our activity to this term. My role is to work with artists, with supporters, with different municipal departments, and with residents, and to create links between all of these different departments, fields, and people.

#### Captions

- 1 Glocal Neighbors project, 2013–2015
- 2 Fragment from Ford Fiesta exhibition by Miri Mendel (made during Tzzazit workshop), 2013
- 2 Fragment from Ford Fiesta workshop by Tzzazit, 2013
- 3 Scratch Orchestra project, by Amnon Wolman & Dan Weinstein, 2013–2015
- 4 Meir Tati, Little Big Brother project, 2011
- 5 Meir Tati, from exhibition Your Boy will Amount to Nothing, 2012–2013

Courtesy of The Israeli Center for Digital Art

#### Notes

1 Falash Mura is the name given to those of the Beta Israel community in Ethiopia who converted to Christianity under pressure, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since 2003 there have been waves of Falash Mura immigration, which have caused many public disputes between their supporters and opponents. In 2013, the operation to bring the Falash Mura community to Israel was completed. About 5,000 people have immigrated to Israel.

# Beta Local

## interviewed by Adriana Velasco

**Adriana:** One of the main characteristics of *Beta-Local* is that the local reality of San Juan is both the starting point of the project and its main sphere of action. In this respect, who would you say is the specific community that engages with Beta Local?

**Pablo:** *Beta-Local* is anchored in aesthetic thought and artistic practices in Puerto Rico. So on a basic level, the people that engage more with our programs are visual artists. As an organization we work a lot in supporting art-making—very broadly defined—and we do this while responding to and rethinking our context. We are also focused in creating links across disciplines, and finding connections between artistic practices and other ways of thinking and doing. *Beta-Local* is organized around three main programs: La Práctica, a nine-month production-based program; The Harbor, a residency program; and La Iván Illich, an open school through which anyone can propose a class that they want to take or teach. The user-generated elements of some of our programs, as well as our interest in education and exchange, open the space to a wide range of audiences not necessarily connected to the art world, starting with our immediate neighbors of Old San Juan (where we are based) and people interested in other structures of intellectual and/or knowledge production and exchange.

**Adriana:** It seems like the engagement of *Beta-Local* with the community points to an intersecting point between social work and artistic practice. How would you characterize this intersection and in which ways do you consider that the project has had an impact in the community?

**Pablo:** We insist on artistic practice and aesthetic thought as an essential social and political part of life. This approach, and our focus on exchanges, promotes further collaborations between artists and other social agents, generating unexpected overlaps and setting the conditions for re-addressing our local context.

On the other hand, our idea of community is not a monolithic one; at *Beta-Local* we work and interact with lots of communities. Also, part of our

work is in creating "community," as concept and as something real and concrete. Our most important role is to support artists in making work, especially considering the lack of functionality and support from local institutions. In a place where institutions (most of them) are weak and/or highly bureaucratic, we provide an open and flexible space for critical discussion and debate, which gathers a diverse group of individuals (artists and non-artists) interested in changing the current social and political conditions, not only within cultural production, but life in general. We want to provide a space for contact and exchange between artists and other publics that otherwise would not interact, and this usually works as a catalyst for new or other situations and collaborations that have a positive impact in our social fabric, providing new conditions and other narratives to the existing ones.

**Adriana:** Do you consider that art practices that intervene the social sphere should be "useful"? And is there a way to measure or follow up on this?

**Pablo:** There are many art practices with different "values" attached to them. We think all art, good or bad, intervenes in multiple ways with the social field. Like we mentioned before, we insist on artistic practice and aesthetic thought as an essential social and political part of life. We particularly work with and support artists that have a kinship with the most interesting ideas and forms developing locally or that challenge in a positive way our ways of working. We are creating a critical context for this work—we want it to be discussed, to be challenged, and to push it further. This happens by putting artists together, creating connections between their work and others, and supporting the development of new work and ideas. When this happens, you can follow up on the impact it has on the continuity or the permutations of some projects or work, and on the growing connections (with other artists, curators, intellectuals, with different communities) that generate other exchanges, situations, and discussions for the artists and the community in general.



**Adriana:** So far we have addressed the "Beta" aspect of the project: the experimental methods and ways of working that you are exploring. What about the geographical aspect? It is very clear that the "local" space is San Juan, but where is the balance between the local and the global?

**Pablo:** We think that what is happening here is important to the larger international art conversation, precisely because many of the art world givens are not operational here. The Harbor, our residency program, was created to bring international artists, curators, and thinkers (including Puerto Ricans based abroad) to Puerto Rico every month. This way, we expand our idea of exchange, putting the local into contact with the global. We have many close international collaborators.

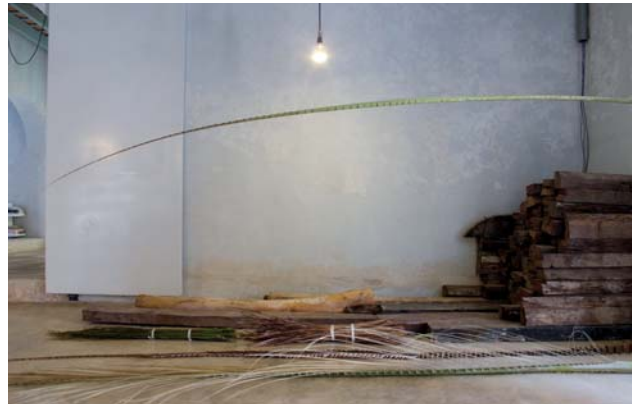
**Adriana:** And what is the role of the curator in *Beta-Local*?

**Pablo:** Like with anything else at *Beta-Local*, roles are super flexible and very broadly defined. Among many things, the curator, as well as the artist, is thought as a facilitator. For us, it is super important that working and exchange relations are among equals, that all agents are on a same level. The inner operational structure and the approach within our programs is a horizontal one.

**Adriana:** When it comes to the origin of the project, from where did it emerge? Did you recognize a need for it in the community? And would you say there are any specific challenges that arise from working with a bilingual community?

**Pablo:** *Beta-Local* grew out of our interest in rethinking aesthetic thought and artistic practice from our local context. The organization is thought of as space for direct critical discussions and a place to foster a strong and healthy artistic community. It also emerged from an effort to formalize and make possible a space for direct dialogue on a daily basis, and to make public meetings that were happening in private at artists' and curators' homes.

In regards to the bilingual situation, we don't see this as a challenge, but as an opportunity. Our geographical and political context gives us the opportunity to work as a bridge, channeling discourse and content in many directions. But it is important to point out that we mainly think in Spanish.



Material show by Diego de la Cruz.  
Casa Abierta, La Práctica, 2014.



Sotobosque (Understory) by Jorge González.  
Casa Abierta, La Práctica, 2014.



Collective reading about Ivan Illich, organized  
by Sofia Olascoaga, 2012.

**Adriana:** And among the three projects that *Beta-Local* runs in parallel, which one would you consider has been the most successful?

**Pablo:** We are proud to contribute as a platform for artists and thinkers who stay in Puerto Rico (and also move back), considering that many people are leaving the Island. It is also great to see how new collaborations have emerged from our programs and to see how participants from *La Práctica* (past and present) continue to develop interesting projects and continue to use other *Beta-Local* platforms. There are some aspects of the programs we want to grow: we want to be able to work on longer-term projects with resident artists, whether that is through developing new work, research, or programming.

**Adriana:** In the practical aspect, how does the internal structure work and how do you finance *Beta-Local*?

**Pablo:** Our funding comes from multiple sources. It ranges from monthly community dinners, where we ask for a \$10 donation (we use that to cover some airplane tickets), to twice-a-year fundraising parties, to contributions and grants from local and international foundations and individual contributors.

**Beta-Local** is a non-profit organization, a working group, and a physical space based in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The project, founded in 2009, is a study and production program, an experimental education project and a platform for critical discussion, which is immersed in the local reality of San Juan and the characteristics of its present moment.

Through three different projects which are run in parallel—*La Práctica*, *The Harbor* and *La Ivan Illich*—*Beta-Local* supports and promotes aesthetic thought and practice, without the intention of becoming an institution in the globalized art market or academic spectrum.

\***Pablo Guardiola** is one of the three current co-directors of *Beta-Local*. For more information about the project, visit: <http://www.betalocal.org>



Buscando a La Sombra, organized by Sofía Gallisá Muriente, November 9th, 2013



La Casa del Sargento, workshop space for *La Práctica*, 2014.

# Fabrizio Boni & Giorgio de Finis (Movie: Space Metropoliz) and Dario & Mirko Bischofberger (Movie: Dog men)

## An interview about movie projects and community issues by Eleonora Stassi

*The one we are going to tell is a science fiction story. But also a cohabitation tale, about sharing and political engagement.*

*It is the story of an occupation and of an artistic provocation, of a space ship and a museum.*

**Space Metropoliz**

[www.spacemetropoliz.com/](http://www.spacemetropoliz.com/)

*In a not-too-distant future only a few homo sapiens are left. Struggling for survival they are forced to live from hunting the last remaining animals in the peripheral ruins of an advanced human civilization.*

*But they are unaware of being stalked themselves by a mysterious scanner.*

*A science fiction story about hunting and being hunted, about extinction and survival, about dogs – and men.*

**Dog Men**

[www.dog-men.ch/](http://www.dog-men.ch/)

**Elenora Stassi:** Could you start by telling me a little bit about your practice in creating science fiction stories?

**SM:** Science-fiction was always part of my imaginary, playful, cinematographic, literary or just fantastic background, but nothing more. I have never created science fiction stories, except for the games that I used to invent as a child: Space Metropoliz is

my first space age drift. I think that this also counts for Giorgio de Finis and this shared background allowed us to explore this topic under many points of views: cinematographic, scientific, philosophic, political, cultural.

**DM:** “Science fiction” means for us “Abstraction”. In *Dog men* we had the goal to tell the most abstract story with the smallest costs possible and the Science fiction genre is the perfect one to reach this aim.

It was a great challenge: to combine, on one hand, the expectations on a sci-fi movie, that are, as usual, very high in its visual and sonic effects, with the limited budget we had, because we wanted to remain independent.

I like this way of alternative movie making, it's more possible than ever before and I think it's a good training: it's all in that. Somewhere hidden there lies the secret and the power of the so called “independent” or “art house cinema”: you have to make something out of nothing, tell an abstract story with and through daily objects. I believe that story telling comes out of seeing life in its details and, by the way, if we have had a big budget, it would have been useful just to add to the movie an enormous explosion or something pyrotechnical like that and let that money burn!



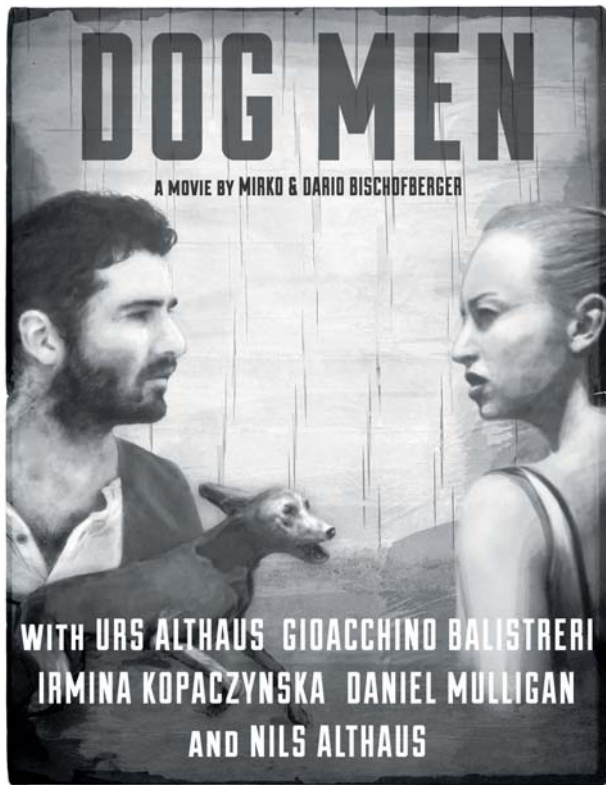
**ES:** How do you relate to the science fiction discourse?

**SM:** We are being poetically inspired by two important movies: *Le voyage dans la Lune* of Melies and *Miracolo a Milano* of De Sica. The first movie is a milestone of fantastic cinema, the second a visionary masterpiece of a Neo-realism master. This was our starting point, what remains came from meetings and reflections builded during the trip, the long and adventurous trip to the Moon.

**DM:** We take this tradition with a critic attitude, that means that through science fiction we wanted to tell real stories about our world (misfortunes, injustice, poverty, success, luck, etc..) in a hidden and fantastic way. With the category of science fiction one can include also the possibility to realise a movie in a format that is one of the most related to the action comics. I think you can reach people who avoid too involving or too pathetic stories, who like movies just because of its extraordinary entertaining character, without forgetting, like the rapper Guru said, that “there’s always a message involved...”.

**ES:** How and when did you decide to use Science Fiction as device to tell the story of this community?

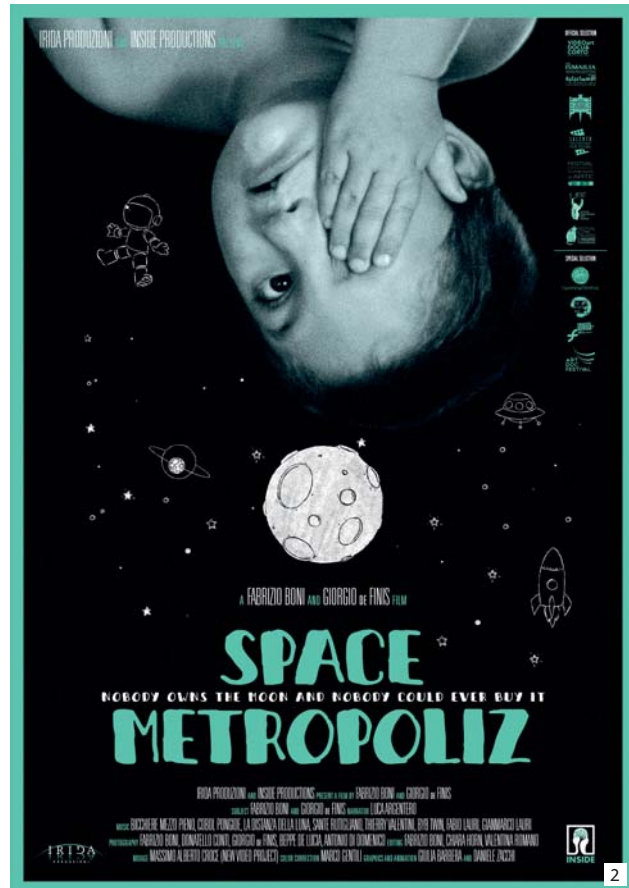
**SM:** George and I had visited Metropoliz, finding a place inhabited extremely interesting, both under the physical and cultural aspects. After our first documentary about Casilino 900 (the biggest gypsy camp of Europe), we wanted to realize a movie about Metropoliz. We came both from an anthropological education and we have both done field research in very specific context, so the problem to work on such a project was not how to establish a relationship with the inhabitants of Metropoliz. We were looking for a clue that could lead us elsewhere respect to the issues that the circumstances of Metropoliz could arouse: a point of view that could allow us to treat this issues from a whole new perspective. So we made up a story in which the inhabitants of Metropoliz built a rocket to move on the Moon, considered as the largest public space near the Earth, where are banned private ownership and use of weapons.



**WITH URS ALTHAUS GIOACCHINO BALISTRERI  
IRMINA KOPACZYNSKA DANIEL MULLIGAN  
AND NILS ALTHAUS**

CAMERA MARTIN BOYER MICHELLE ETTLIN COSTUMES ADRIANA DE NICOLA MUSIC ANDREA ESPERTI  
SOUND PETER BRÄKER VISUAL EFFECTS SASCHA ROSSIER SCI-FI SOFTWARE LAURA SYMUL GRADING NICOLÒ SETTEGRANA  
[WWW.DOG-MEN.CH](http://WWW.DOG-MEN.CH)

1



A FABRIZIO BONI AND GIORGIO DE FINIS FILM

**SPACE  
METROPOLIZ**

NOBODY OWNS THE MOON AND NOBODY COULD EVER BUY IT

DIRIGIDA PRODUZIONI AND INSIDE PRODUCTIONS PRESENTA UN FILM DI FABRIZIO BONI AND GIORGIO DE FINIS  
SCENEGGIATO DA FABRIZIO BONI AND GIORGIO DE FINIS MONTATO DA LUCA ARGENTIERO  
MUSICA DI CECILIE MIZZI PERNO CHERA PONDRELLA LA DISCANZA DELLA LUNA. SANTI RITTOPIANO THEOY VALIENTIN ERIC FINN PABLO LAURE CAMARON LAURE  
PRODOTTORE FABRIZIO BONI DONATELLO CENTI GIORGIO DE FINIS BEPPY DE LUCA ANTONIO DI DOMENICO ASSISTENTE FABRIZIO BONI CHERA HELEN VALENTINA ROMANO  
MONTAGGI MASSIMILIANO BERTI CRICCE INCHI VIDEI PROJECT COLLEZIONE MARCO CENTI DISEGNI E ILLUSTRAZIONI GIULIA BARREDA AND DANIELE PIZZI  
DISTRIBUITO DA TRIPRA

2



**DM:** Out of our plot pool we decided in November 2012 to work on a science fiction movie mostly for technical reasons. We could realise the movie thanks to the affordable possibilities of shooting in full-HD. Then we established that Dog men had to be a black and white movie, to give a timeless connotation, and to realize it during the summer 2013 on the isle of Favignana (Sicily) to have:

- the mediterranean light (no need of light equipment);
- the natural set of caves and rural landscape;
- good and price worth food and wine (low catering costs and holidays included).

**ES:** It seems to exist behind your project the consideration of the “movie” as expedient to deepen into social and scientific issues. Do you think that a movie can be as social instrument, a research possibility and an experiment?

**SM:** As anthropologist and documentaries director, I involve the filmic instrument in the investigation of a given context, in addition to the expression of my world view. Space Metropolis had this connotation from the start: being a socio-artistic experiment to explore the dimensions of imagination, dream or utopia itself in a very different and antagonistic all day life context.

**DM:** Of course. A science fiction movie is always related to society and to science. It is an abstraction of our civilization, a metaphor for our real world. Otherwise it wouldn't be so interesting for the audience.

**ES:** How is this opportunity integrated in your movie?

**SM:** We took always seriously the “game” to bring Metropolis on the Moon. At the end it's an idea impossible to realize, but simultaneously easy to visualize or imagine. For this we could share it with all the people fascinated or involved by such a crazy mission.

**DM:** Without judging, it is shown how naturally cruel the world is as a matter of fact: „nature“ and “vicious circle“ seem to be synonyms. We talk about the presumed necessity of violence in nature.

There is also a personal thing about our past we wanted to integrate: to show things that we have heard from our forefathers, living in rural poverty where the struggle for survival is physical, normal things that for us, people of “the first world”, feel as incredible or disgusting. Eating a raw snail, for example, or dogs.

**ES:** About what is real and what is fiction.

**How** is the backstage everyday life related to the film utopia?

**SM:** When we proposed to the inhabitants of Metropolis our concept, it came out only a point to be clearly defined: the trip to the Moon doesn't had to represent an escape from reality or a surrender. People that occupy a house expose themselves to claim their rights and can't identify with a space colonist.

For this reason, science-fiction had to be contaminated with reality and become an Utopia. The rocket, that the inhabitants had to built, turned into a real vehicle able to bring the Metropolis on the Moon. Its construction would have ratified the success of the trip and its launch would have been the landing on the white satellite. The combined effort through a symbolic aim could transform the place of departure in the one of arrival, the Metropolis on the Moon.

**DM:** I think that for the actors it wasn't more abstract than in other movies: interpreting a human or a humanoid is pretty much the same, you can have a seemingly „cold“ character as an android as well as a police officer giving you a fine for wrong parking. The acting can be the same.

It is just amusing and very fun on the set to see how a virtual or fantastic story is realised and how everybody on the set, when the camera shuts off straight after a futuristic scene, come back to reality: all you can see is funny dressed people looking at each other standing on a sandbar somewhere out there on this planet. Not so different of being on an after hour rave, when someone pulls out the plug.

**ES:** Are you recording the “afterlife” of your movie project? Do you feel after all still involved in its research aims?

**SM:** Space Metropolis gave life to a new artistic project, the MAAM, Museo dell'Altro e dell'Altrove (Museum of the other and the elsewhere) of Metropolis, curated completely by Giorgio de Finis.

**DM:** This “afterlife” was a main topic of our work from its start. Mirko and I believe in the importance of being timeless in our creations. We made this movie like a writer would have written a statement about this world. This is what we think, how nature follows its rules.

**ES:** Would you define your movie as an example of a futuristic social sculpture?

**SM:** After having experienced the afterlife of the movie, with the birth of MAAM, I think that Metropolitiz today is going to become an enormous collective artwork, inhabited, lively.

The movie was for sure an innovative example of cinematographic and artistic “construction site”. It had the task to trigger unprecedented processes and to open co-operations sceneries between art and social movements.

**DM:** You can name it like that, but I would rather call it an essay about the real world.

**Captions**

1 Dog Men Poster, artwork: Engy Aly + Laura Symul

2 Space Metropolitiz Poster, artwork: Valerio Calcagnile; ph. Giorgio de Finis, Illustrations: Giulia Barbera

3 Movie Backstage (Mirko Bischofberger + Gioacchino Balistreri) ph. Eleonora Stassi

4 Movie Backstage (M. & D. Bischofberger, Michelle Ettlin, Irmina Kopaczyńska) ph. Eleonora Stassi

5 Movie Backstage (M. & D. Bischofberger) ph. Eleonora Stassi

6 Movie Backstage (Irmina Kopaczyńska, Daniel Mulligan) ph. Eleonora Stassi

7 Movie Backstage (Irmina Kopaczyńska, Michelle Ettlin) ph. Eleonora Stassi

8 Patrizio, ph. Giorgio de Finis

9 La luna al popolo, ph. Giorgio de Finis

10 Rockett, ph. Giorgio de Finis

11 (The) Metropolitiz (MAAM - Museo dell'Altro e dell'Altrove di Metropolitiz), ph. Velia Calevi (metropolitiz 0 to 4)







**Fabrizio Boni**, born in Bologna in 1973, moved soon to Rome, where after the high school diploma studied at the faculty of Sociology at the university „La Sapienza“. During his studies, he started to use the audiovisual equipment as a research instrument. His thesis was an ethnographical work about the homeless of Termini, the main train station of Rome, and realized his first documentary “Dory e i ragazzi di Via Marsala”.

He continued his research and filmmaker activity studying direction and visual anthropology.

Between 2000 and 2006 worked with the group Laboratorio3, a collective of researchers and sociologists realizing and experimenting socio-anthropological documentaries.

2008 is the year of his first full-length film “C’era una volta Savorengo Ker: la casa di tutti”, together with the director Giorgio de Finis: a documentary about the biggest european gipsy camp, the Casilino 900.

In 2010 Fabrizio founded Irida Produzioni, independent communication and production agency, the one with he produced the documentary “Space Metropoliz”.

### **Giorgio de Finis**

Anthropologist, journalist, filmmaker and photographer. Author of several books and scientific articles, founded and directed “Il Mondo 3. Rivista di teoria delle scienze umane e sociali” and is the ex-director of the “Journal of European Psychoanalysis”.

He researched and taught in different italian and international universities.

From 1991 to 1997 was visiting research associate of Manila University. Since more than ten years he researches on urbanity.

He realized more than 400 documentaries and journalistic services for the television, tv series and programs.

With the documentary «Diari dalla megalopoli. Mumbai», he won the «Premio Zevi per la Comunicazione dell’architettura».

With Stalker/ON realized the documentaries «Rome to Roma. Diario nomade», «Otnarat. Taranto a futuro inverso» for the Apulia Film Commision, «C’era una volta... Savorengo Ker, la Casa di Tutti» (with F. Boni), «Appunti dal G. R. A.».

He conceived the “Monumentalia. Videocatalogo dell’architettura italiana”. He is artistic director of -1 art gallery of Casa dell’Architettura, project space dedicated to street art.

From 2011 Giorgio works at Metropoliz, via Prenestina 913, where he realized the documentary «Space Metropoliz», with F. Boni.

He founded and promotes the MAAM, Museo dell’Altro e dell’Altrove of Metropoliz.

His videos and pictures were presented at the 9th, 10th and 11th Mostra Internazionale di Architettura at the Venice Biennale, at the Chinese National Museum of Beijing, Milan Triennial, Athens, Buenos Aires and Rotterdam Biennials and at the «FotoGrafia Festival internazionale di Roma» (2008, 2009, 2011). For the expo Shanghai 2010 realized the video installations «Sustainable Cities in Italian Style» and «Il Giardino italiano» (italian pavilion).

He is the author of several photographic books as Postcards, Aut not Out. Ritratti di bambini con autismo, Umani, Urbani & Marziani and Diari urbani (introduction of Marc Augé) and, coming soon, «Space Metropoliz. Inizia l’era delle migrazioni esoplanetarie».

**Mirko Bischofberger** (Bellinzona 1980) is a PhD graduated biochemist at the Lausanne ETH. He is the initiator of the Swiss fiction Movement.

**Dario Bischofberger** (Johannesburg 1975) is a musician. He works as wine importer in Zurich.

Dario and Mirko are brothers and make since their childhood films together.

At first those were just short films on private issues, then music videoclips, then short documentaries on assignment. With their first full-length film OLD IS THE NEW (Switzerland 2012), started their experimentation on movie. In 2014 they realized DOG MEN, „a science-fiction movie inspired by the past“. The Bischofberger brothers spent a large part of their childhood in Southern Italy, where their forefathers used to live as illiterate farmers working in the fields and eating dog meat to survive. These peasants were in fact called “mangiacani” locally, which means “dog eaters” in Italian. It is this historical background of scarce resources that inspired the directors to make a science-fiction movie. The rural poverty of the mangiacani is transposed into an apocalyptic stone pits architecture in a story that is at the same time very new and very remote. With DOG MEN, they were selected for the Solothurner Filmtage 2014. Mirko and Dario are self-taught directors and followers of movie authors. They both write the screenplay and do the direction.



# Altes Finanzamt, Berlin

## interviewed by Silvia Converso

**SC:** Altes Finanzamt is a collective whose members have different backgrounds, origins, and artistic practises. In your space you host exhibitions, performances, concerts, readings, dinners, film screenings, debates, and many other innovative and unique formats of events. Considering this whole diverse lot that your space and collective represent, are there any aspects and synergies that you as a group particularly aim to explore?

**AF:** I think that the diversity in the programme is one of the stronger aspects of AF as a project space. It represents a different kind of challenge, since the audience never fully knows what to expect. You could walk into an installation on a Tuesday and come back to find a musician manipulating electronics for her noise performance one week later. So there is also a big shift in the audience, depending on what's on. In the beginning you could say that there were two nuclei in the collective—Piso, a visual art collective, which had another short-lived space, Matador Kantine, and teamed up with a group of friends, who knew them and had the same vision of opening a space in Berlin, with an interest in film, music, and performances. I came into the mix shortly thereafter as the only non-Iberian person in the collective at the time, wanting to focus mostly on readings. Since then, some people have left and new ones have joined, blurring the focus even more and making AF more international. To me (and I can only speak for myself when it comes to AF), one of the most interesting things about the work as a very loose-knit collective has been the decision-making process. We have somehow managed to operate on a consensus basis, despite the varied interest of the members and their objectives. I guess one could say that this is something we explore collectively, but apart from that, members have complete freedom in the programming and the usage of the space, with due respect to the others. As I recall there was a bigger tendency to present our future ideas for events in the monthly meetings, where, theoretically, anyone could veto the plans, but it's always been very free and left to each member to decide. Of course, we have had heavier discussions at times and aesthetic differences between people who don't necessarily

share a large common ground in their own creative output, but we've always been able to work around it.

**SC:** Do you think that your collective has managed to also create a community—not only with the founding members but also your audience—since the opening of the space and formation of the group? If yes, how?

**AF:** The collective has grown tentacles in the form of a very varied audience and therefore spawned collaborations between people who might otherwise not have worked together, or even met for that matter. So yes, one of the best things has been this inclusion of the audience, people who bring ideas and proposals of their own. All of the members who joined after the space was founded, myself included, have somehow come from this pool.

**SC:** Speaking about the space and location, indeed your space can be considered the twelfth member of your collective, if not the most important one and its very core. Do you think that your collective would have the same energy if, for some reason or another, you needed to leave the space?

**AF:** The space is important, although it's hard to see what is of sentimental value and what would be replaceable. I think we've managed to get a lot out of the space we have, but others would have found different ways, and I'm also sure this collective could have thrived in a different one. At one point, when some of the founding members were leaving Berlin, and therefore the collective, we contemplated shutting it down. However, with the city's increasing rents and the ongoing gentrification, those of us who stayed behind and wanted to continue would not have had an easy time finding a new venue. Our landlords have also been supportive of our work and showed flexibility beyond the norm, even though we've had the usual problems of being a gathering point in a residential area.

**SC:** Which one is/are the event(s) that according to you have been the most significant for Altes Finanzamt so far?

**AF:** I'm sure no two members would answer this question in the same way. I've seen many amazing works come together in the space, but somehow the talks afterwards with interesting people and ensuing friendships is what will prevail in my otherwise unstable memory. Those talks tend to overlap with the events, which is definitely the case with the *Philosophical Football* and *Das Poesiebüro*, for example. In a desperate attempt to give readers a more specific answer, I glanced at a long list of artists, and to name a few (too few) who left a particular mark on me, I would mention the music of *HHY & the Macumbas* and *Jealousy Party*, performances by *Flocks and Shoals*, the exhibitions *The Springs of the Flood* by founding members Mariana Caló and Francisco Queimadela and *Field Studies* by Christopher Kline and Sol Calero, as well as readings by Cia Rinne and Bjarte Alvestad.

**SC:** How has Altes Finanzamt managed to influence and engage the art scene and other off spaces in Neukölln? How has it changed since 2010, with the opening of the space?

**AF:** I don't know, really. One of the great things about Berlin, including Neukölln, is that there are so many people doing their own thing. The city is full of small spaces, bars, associations, concert venues, and galleries catering to a specific scene with eclectic programmes. AF has collaborated with many, mostly through the member's own connections and interests. A lot has changed since we started, as there are always new places popping up and others being replaced, usually by commercial activity, as a result of rocketing rents.

**SC:** In 2013, you won a prize and recognition from the City of Berlin for independent spaces. How did this change the activity of Altes Finanzamt.

**AF:** It didn't change much. The money came in very handy since we could pay off debts that had accumulated despite our best efforts. Some parts of the space and the equipment were in a sad state, so we used most of the money on infrastructure. The prize was a nice recognition for all the work done without expectations of any sort of financial gain, from a city that prides itself for its alternative art scene, but does very little to support it.

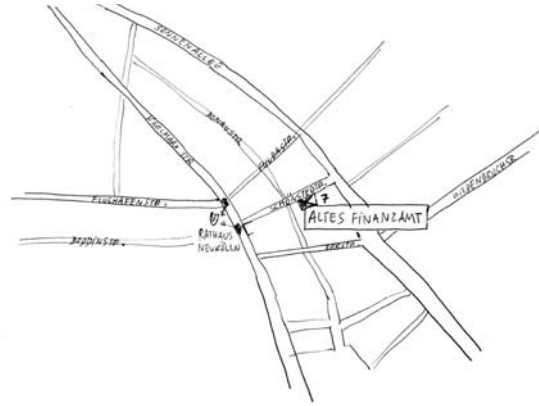
**SC:** What other new projects you as a collective are now working on?

**AF:** Same as always. We're trying to find new ways of using the space, adapting to new members and trying to make things happen—hopefully with good quality but open to experimentation and failure, and inclusive of anyone who doesn't discriminate against people for who they are. That's my very own answer at least.

**Altes Finanzamt** is a Berlin-based collective formed by twelve members coming from different countries, mostly from Portugal. The name of the collective derives from the location in which the group usually gathers, the previous tax office in Neukölln, namely the Altes Finanzamt. Its members dedicate themselves to different artistic practices, such as photography, music, poetry, performance, and theatre. Altes Finanzamt hosts various weekly events, such as readings, parties, exhibitions, concerts, film screenings, and many more.







# San Keller

## interviewed by

# Agustina Strüngmann

**AS:** What is your relation to the Dušan Murić Learning Centre / NOT MY LAB?

**SK:** I mentored Martin Schick in other projects and in the development of the Learning Centre. In this sense, I am like the brand or the name for the developing phase of the Learning Centre. Now it is up to Martin Schick to create its institutional power.

**AS:** What are your thoughts about the Learning Centre?

**SK:** Martin Schick's idea is to create a space that is definitely not an art institution. It is much more about learning in a basic sense; it is more a creativity-learning centre related to daily art practice and exchange. To provide a structure where one can learn how to make living more ecological and independent from the capitalist system.

**AS:** Does the centre have any historical models or influences?

**SK:** Martin played with the fact to be influenced, influenced by me and by others. I also think that Martin is a clever mind in the way he samples information and brings it together in the form of a play. But here, he is also capable of adding a real "do it." He thought it was necessary to give the piece a real space, another type of space to the play that is going from stage to stage, from Brussels to Rome; it is like giving it an identity somehow. I think it is also interesting to work in this way. You create a play and you go on tour, and it has in this way a starting point but it also stays. Fribourg is the place where he comes from; it is related to his original roots. You can definitely work nicely with a place that is close to where you come from and that is related to your identity.

**AS:** In your work you are very much working with communities, and people participate. How would you define a community? Can anything be a community?

**SK:** I don't have a definition for community, but one could think of the concept of community on different levels or as the framework one is using. Is it related to something public? Or is it related to your profession or to your private life? Will these parts be separated or mixed? Do you provide the mediums that create the community?

**AS:** In terms of your artistic practice, are you interested in the afterlife of the projects? How does your work impact the community around you? Do you create a community?

**SK:** It is an interesting question. I also ask myself why I started working in the social field. I think that in the social space you are never able to have the total control of the form; you are providing structures. I must say that I am starting communities, though I wouldn't say that I am interested in being the "founder" of a community. I always carry out research to try to understand how the system and communities work. I am not there just to build a community or to have the idea of what I would like to build, but it is more a way of understanding societies. Many would say that if you want to try to understand social behaviour, you could then study sociology theory. Contrary to that, I do my research in the real world, and that is the way I think I can go into a process that will bring me farther. I always need to connect the research information with the real, backwards and forwards. In that case, that is also maybe the reason why I would say that it is a process of understanding.

**AS:** Maybe it is more about raising questions?

**SK:** Yes, to myself and also to the public, to others. So then you can ask yourself: "Where are the communities that are interested in raising the type of questions you are concerned with?," and "Are you at the right place if you are in an educational institution, or is it impossible there?" Is it interesting to



raise these questions as an artist, or is it better to do that within your family? I don't know.

**AS:** What is your current field of interest?

**SK:** As an artist and a teacher, I am interested in the question of how to create your identity in an institution, as someone who is getting paid, getting a fixed salary. It is interesting to compare if there is a way of combining the work as a teacher with something of your own, like a free space inside the institution. What would that mean? I think it is a very interesting question.

It is not only about trying to find your own voice inside the institution, but also about creating a place where you can do something more liberating. I think it is possible to accomplish that, especially in an institution where there are hidden spaces that one could use to make things happen. I mean not everything has to go public. For many things it is also good if there is a space that could grow. Not only joining the institution to do one's job, but also looking artistically at the institutional space and what one could do with it.

**San Keller** was born in 1971 in Bern, Switzerland, and currently lives and works in Zurich, Switzerland. He is well known for his participatory performances and ephemeral actions that frequently approximate social experiments. The overall tone of Keller's oeuvre is critical, conceptual and playful and reflects on the relationship between art and life.

His investigation of art as a service ultimately gives the audience the opportunity to question out-dated paradigms and experience them in a new way, while also placing them under critical scrutiny.

His actions start off with contractual arrangements that set up the rules for his works, but since they rely on the participation of others, the course they take and their ultimate outcome is unpredictable.

Recent exhibitions include: Deleted Scenes, Galerie Brigitte Weiss, Zurich (2015); Invent The Future With Elements of the Past, Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich (2015); Disteli – Keller – Warhol, Art Museum Olten, Switzerland (2013). Forthcoming projects include: Twisting C (r) ash, Athens and Le Commun, Geneva (2015) and PerformanceProcess, Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris (2015).

**<http://www.museumsankeller.ch>**

# Martin Schick and Dusan Murić interviewed by Agustina Strüngmann

Martin Schick's new project "Dušan Murić Learning Centre" is an institute for "applied post-capitalism." It is a modest wooden structure in Fribourg that provides a space to think collectively about alternatives to capitalism. Schick invites participants to engage in workshops to imagine and practice a life without capitalism. The interview explores the meaning of the centre and how it becomes an open stage for possibilities.

**AS:** What is the concept of the Dušan Murić Learning Centre?

**MS:** The learning centre is literally a field study, a comment on the appropriation of the educational sector by private industries, an alternative to the Rolex Learning Centre in Lausanne. It is the first institute for applied post-capitalism. A place to reflect on off-system ideas paid by capitalist enterprises. The space encourages collective thinking – a starting point for a possible do-it-yourself reality.

**AS:** How did the learning centre project originate?

**MS:** Two years ago, I was conceded a 100-square meter piece of land with no infrastructure in Fribourg, Switzerland. At the same time, in collaboration with the Greek performer Kiriakos Hadjiioannou, we presented *NOT MY PIECE* at the Belluard Bollwerk International Festival in Fribourg. We used the piece of land to rehearse for the festival, and we then decided to present *NOT MY PIECE* there.

The piece was quite disorganized, but then it turned out that the work's messy quality contributed to its meaning. *NOT MY PIECE* was very well received at the premiere. In July this year we inaugurated the learning centre outside the Belluard Bollwerk International Festival.

**AS:** Why was the learning centre inaugurated outside the Belluard Bollwerk International Festival?

**MS:** I like the idea of benefiting from a structure that is already there—to use its audience. We did publicity and brought the people to the learning centre. For this type of project, I think it is more exciting to do something outside the festival, because it is in line with the main idea of post-capitalism, of being outside of the system, outside of the institution.

**AS:** So how does *NOT MY PIECE* relate to the learning centre project?

**MS:** During the performance of *NOT MY PIECE*, the audience got membership cards to get in touch with us for the construction of the centre. There was an open call where people could submit different ideas for the building type to be constructed. *NOT MY PIECE* provides the audience to the learning centre. The learning centre is a narrative that we use for *NOT MY PIECE*. Since Dušan Murić is having "resistance," this year he will be following the tour of the piece. He will perform at the show, and then we will show pictures about where the learning centre is right then, on which stage. And then the next year something else will be added.

**AS:** On the project's website, there is now an open call for people who want to apply to the "Artist in resistance" programme. What is the concept of the "Artist in resistance" programme?

**MS:** It is like an "artist in residence" programme, but to make fun of these types of programmes I called it "resistance," because it is very much about using culture money for something that is actually meant not to fit the system. Thinking about curating, this is a way of not just going for a residency at institutional sites but to say: "Ok, we

also have our own places for residencies.” The idea is to bring down the power structure. We are commenting on the fact that the curator is more and more becoming the artist, its figure is becoming important and powerful to the point that without the curator, the artist is nothing. With this proposed “artist in resistance” we call for a scenario where the artists adopt curatorial strategies, the “artist-curator.” It would be also nice if someone from the audience, who is not an artist, applies to the programme. Like this, we would break the rule of an artist in residence; an “artist in resistance” does not necessarily have to be an artist.

**AS:** What will you do at the learning centre?

**MS:** The learning centre is a field study; it is really about standing on the field and asking yourself:

“Ok, what shall we do now?” It is a space to meet and think collectively about how to be independent of the system, thinking about how we could be self-sufficient, how we could satisfy our basic needs.

**DM:** If you are talking about what post-capitalism could mean, it could mean that there are no commodities around you and if you want to satisfy your needs you have to do it yourself, there are no experts whom you can talk with to provide you with a solution. Therefore you have to provide your own solution. I think this is what we are going to do: if you need something then you build it. It doesn't mean that you become a hippie, but rather a question of creating innovation by using tradition, making some good investments while stopping consumption in other fields, an “age of less.” **MS:** What I also find funny is that we build this space, and then most probably few people will come, because no one really has time to think about alternatives because everybody is working. It produces an absurdity that is quite interesting to think about. People don't have time for post-capitalism because they are just trapped in the system.

**AS:** What activities do you plan at the learning centre?

**MS:** The learning centre is explained as a place of sharing and creating. Maybe every Saturday people will be invited to come and learn something, for example how to do home gardening. Concrete things. A workshop on sustainability is scheduled for November this year, and we will continue to add

activities and gatherings, all of these are announced on the website [www.notmylab.org](http://www.notmylab.org).

**AS:** Will you involve the surrounding community?

**MS:** Yes, the idea is to gather at the learning centre to do workshops, and to talk about possible alternatives. What I imagine is something like the *Rolax Learning Centre* in Lausanne, but this instead is a centre for post-capitalism, financed by *Fondation Nestlé pour l'Art*, and when you go you find that it is actually very basic. We will be talking about what is possible, because this post-capitalism is also very much two-sided. On one hand, it means going back to nature by trying to find alternatives of self-sufficiency, but on the other hand, of course, it uses the technology and money from capitalism in order to prosper.

**AS:** For how long do you have the piece of land?

**MS:** For 99 years. 97 are left. That is also a part of the projection of course; the land is there for 97 years, and it is there also to be transformed. I imagine that next year we will maybe use this space to build something else. The centre is open to change.

**AS:** So once you start, you will see what it would lead to?

**MS:** We will see what happens with time. We are not interested in the immediate result, but in building something visible and attractive. We had built a geodesic dome, a very symbolic structure that comes from the alternative building ideas of Buckminster Fuller. Fuller is someone who is very much triggering the logic that we are following. To build a geodesic dome is not very effective because there is not much you can do in it, because the shape doesn't allow so much. At the same time, it is enough to provide a structure where we can meet and talk.

The idea is that we plant a tree at the centre of the geodesic dome, and that it takes until 2030 for it to be lifted. We wait until the tree has grown and then we construct the learning centre. In the end, the learning centre becomes a kind of time machine, a utopia—we are talking about what we can do with this place, and it is more about what would be possible, a library or a time bank. I like the things that you cannot close as a product. As there is no result, you cannot say: “Now we did it,” and it's finished. It is more like we plant this tree, for instance, as a sym-

bolic gesture that represents something that might grow. However, you don't know how it is going to grow, and if it dies then it becomes something else.

**AS:** Are you getting some inspiration from other projects?

**MS:** Actually, in 2013 I presented the "mobile capsule" at Beursschouwburg in Brussels. It was a survival capsule for a life after capitalism, an easy do-it-yourself structure to include in one's garden. This capsule was a predecessor of the learning centre, and it might land there one day. It is a structure that is very small but transportable. It contains different expressions for a life without capitalism. I was re-using objects, such as a radio that only worked by hand, a wind turbine that was supposed to make energy but didn't work, or a homemade internet receiver among other objects. A funny way of putting it, saying: "Look, what you need is not a shelter under the earth, what you need is a shelter to live independent of the system." Yet at the same time things are not working.

**AS:** And the learning centre is somehow this same idea?

**MS:** Yes, but the learning centre is a community-based place where people can learn about how to live differently, to use this money to create ideas that make people stop following the capitalistic logic and prevent them from buying their products as they become independent. That is the dream behind it, but of course it stays very much symbolic.



# The Grandhotel Cosmopolis Augsburg (Germany)

interviewed by Anna Frech

The Grandhotel Cosmopolis is not a usual hotel. Based on the idea of the Social Sculpture, it accommodates refugees, artists, musicians, and travelers under one and the same roof. Unlike in ordinary asylum seeker homes, this model provides an alternative solution of how refugees can be integrated into social life rather than live completely isolated from society. Susa Gunzner, Susi Weber, and Stef Maldener, members of the artists collective “Kunstkoncontainer” at the Grandhotel Cosmopolis, took their time to answer my questions.

**Anna Fech:** What started your interest in creating a Social Sculpture with the Grandhotel Cosmopolis?

**Kunstcontainer:** In the city centre of Augsburg, a former nursing home stood empty. Augsburg is located in southern Germany and has a migration rate of over 40%. The building belongs to the *Diakoniewerk*<sup>1</sup> of Augsburg, and the landlords were already about to negotiate with Swabia’s government to establish a home for asylum seekers, when the idea of Grandhotel Cosmopolis sprang to mind for three young creative people. The concept was based on the local conditions (such as the empty house in the city centre, a lack of affordable artist’s studios, and accommodation for international guests at reasonable prices in Augsburg) but also with the desire for more humane treatment of refugees. Thus, they formulated a vision creating a win-win situation for everybody. However, this vision of “acting together” could only be realized through an astonishing degree of creativity and by involving the social environment. This Social Sculpture, suddenly, manifested itself in the space-time-continuum.

From this initial desire—a more humane interaction with each other—the possibility was given to expand the original community through the support of many different parties: the open mind and heart of the landlords who agreed to participate in this artistic and social experiment the colourful mixed group of artists and creative people, and the support of the friendly-minded city community,

which today forms the heart of the Social Sculpture. It was highly pleasant for us to observe how a constant process of re-defining the location of home has taken place.

**AF:** Which role does the community play for you within your concept?

**KC:** Many challenges we were confronted with during the past three years, we have been only able to cope with as a community. Which is not easy sometimes—every member has to balance out his individual versus the collective needs every day.

Very often we ask ourselves: what does unite people from such a heterogeneous group that we have in our house? What does “unity” and “unity in diversity” mean? When we, for example, meet for dinner or work together on a project, the difference between the participants moves to the background. Cultural origins, social status, or the reason why a person stays in the house do not play a role anymore in joint actions and in everyday interactions. It is much more important to share a common idea or event with each other. A hotel guest can leave again tomorrow, a refugee can be deported suddenly; therefore such moments of joint experience and actions are very special and important for us.

**AF:** From your experience with how artists, refugees, and guests from all over the world interact with each other, do you think there exists a sense of community beyond regional or cultural borders?

**KC:** The people staying at the Grandhotel Cosmopolis are placed here due to a number of situations. Some of them are here because of their own volition, looking for new ways and experiences and wanting to be involved in projects; others are re-located to this place by the government, because they had to leave their home country and are accommodated in a shared accommodation facility during the time of their asylum procedure; again others are here because they visit the city and take a guestroom in the Grandhotel Cosmopolis. It’s a temporary

home—for whatever reason. However, to experience the feeling of community, to have a conversation, to meet, to build up mutual trust, and to open ourselves up needs time and a basic interest to engage with each other. Otherwise, the different people are only co-existing side-by-side but not living together.

**AF:** In what way would you like to initiate a change with your Social Sculpture?

**KC:** Of course, already in the initial concept a different understanding of community was anchored. We were very well aware that the project would create a certain experimental situation regarding the social engagement with refugees. Today, from experience in the house, we recognized that in many situations the prevailing differences between the people are not very much taken into account – but rather the connecting moments. In the sense of the Social Sculpture we are interested more in the characteristics of the individual—also transcultural—that enrich our lives.

**AF:** What problems are you confronted with within this process of change, and how did you deal with them?

**KC:** A refugee seeking asylum in Germany is very limited in his/her personal development, and overseen by, for example, the residence restriction and constantly kept in the threat of state repressions. Against this background, it is very difficult to create an atmosphere of real participatory communication and meeting on the same eye level. However, this for us is a basis for living with each other in a supporting community that should provide help in any problematic situation. To compensate for such differences, Wilde 13<sup>2</sup> was founded, which deals particularly with the problems of the asylum legislation and the associated challenges, on the individual level as well as on the political level.

**AF:** Do you think something has changed already?

**KC:** To compare it with other asylum housing facilities, we have quite a low conflict rate among the different ethnic groups encountering each other. We experience a very communicative exchange beyond any language barriers. Also, many of our asylum-seeking guests see themselves as a part of a big family, some of them have been offered a possibility of their own apartments, but preferred to stay in the house. The acceptance within the city society

increased in the meantime, probably also related to the big media echo caused by the project. The artists do not create a stage to act for themselves, but contribute to the society with their practical work, which is very normal in our project. Within this Grandhotel-cosmos, the people participate and contribute to a system that works disconnected from a conventional understanding of labour. This affects not only the artist's works but is expanded on all the other different fields of the project. As a result, a system of values develops, which is marked by self-responsibility and inner necessity.

**AF:** Do you think the model Grandhotel Cosmopolis might be a trendsetter for the future and will be a source of inspiration for similar projects?

**KC:** The Grandhotel Cosmopolis has already been called a realized utopia. Several projects in Germany and Europe are interested in our approach and develop similar projects, of course, adjusted and implemented according to the specific local conditions. The idea to change the social organism from its contemporary state of deformation to a more human and worthwhile living shape leads many people to work on their immediate surroundings – being aware of the prevailing and often restricted structures. Instead of losing energy and time in demonstration, which finally highlights rather the differences between the social groups, it is essential to concentrate on the interpersonal exchange and to understand them as such—as humans. The potential lies much more in the individual and local surrounding situation of every individual person and the necessity of becoming personally involved to improve things. In this sense, we would like to quote R. Buckminster Fuller: “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

**1** Diakoniewerk is a charity organization of the Protestant Church. The German Diakoniewerk helps to shape the life of the Church and society in Germany.

**2** Wilde 13: Volunteers at the Grandhotel Cosmopolis supporting new refugees with regard to official administration work, translation, research, etc., to facilitate their arrival in Augsburg.

**3** Niels Bohr and Buckminster Fuller, “It’s Not What You Think...It’s How, “ In *Possible Futures: Creative Thinking for the Speed of Life*, (Lifestage Publications: New York 2008), 15.





# Planting Rice

## interviewed by Kenneth Paranada

**KP:** I am very interested in your collaboration platform that tries to generate awareness about contemporary art in the Philippines. Can you tell me about the story of Planting Rice and how it came about?

**PR:** Planting Rice is a curatorial collaborative founded in Manila, Philippines. Contextualized to the current conditions of contemporary art production in the city, as well as a cultural infrastructure that is flawed – we endeavored to create programming with full awareness of these conditions. We also function as a site for information, events, and archives of current discussions in contemporary art in the region. It is very hard to create contemporary art projects in Manila, without addressing very important problems like art education, funding, labor, and capital. Within our programming, we also reconcile with the fact that we started out without a physical space. As such, this gives us opportunities within the idea of “repotentializing” spaces, and also including the discussion of architecture, autonomy, territory, demarcation, and ephemera within our everyday notions of contemporary art. In our case, we have created programs that explore different spaces, for instance, an unknown commercial art space. We build partnerships and focus on creating potential. For example, the emerging/unknown commercial art space funded the production budget and honorarium of a five-series contemporary art installation with emerging artists from Manila. Funding for the production budget and honorarium of a non-sellable work in Manila is very rare, in this case it worked out because they needed the promotion, and they created this as a strategy to introduce the space to this type of audience. Within the social networks, we practice metacognition by intentionally using our networks as curators to get a pool of news (art events, grants, opportunities) from our feeds, which we then shape into a system of organized resources/information for the arts. We utilize free networks such as social media as an education/information tool for artists working in Manila or citizens involved in the art scene in Southeast Asia with Manila as the focus.

Planting Rice came out of our own desire to

educate ourselves as curators about our own geography and needs with the Manila art scene. We ended up learning side by side with the rest of the art community of Manila via the design of our online platform (website, e-news), and the purposive use of our social networks. Manila is, after all, one of the top ten users of Facebook in the world.

**KP:** You’ve been known to be a “curatorial collab,” what does this actually mean?

**PR:** It just means that with all projects labeled as Planting Rice, it is actually a byproduct of the collaboration of two curators, Sidd Perez and Lian Ladia.

**KP:** Are you the producers of exhibitions for communities or the mediator, translator?

**PR:** I think as a curator, producer/mediator/translator are all part of the job description. In our case, it can also be cultural worker, with the kind of work we do in terms of informing our public of mobility opportunities and access to archives of contemporary art through our online library.

**KP:** Tell me about the dynamics of how you work.

**PR:** It has been very easy within the dynamics of how we work as a collaborative; we have the same goals and ideals, as well as being versed in the ethics and management of our community, such as working very hard, and having the concept of a non-physical, but cultural value is something we have successfully explored. You see, if the goal is non-monetary, and the driving forces are ideas and values—it becomes self-sustaining.

**KP:** What were your personal motivations for doing this?

**PR:** Personally, the flawed mechanisms of cultural infrastructure in Manila is what is moving this. Honestly, this project is autonomous yet sustaining.



**KP:** Your curatorial strategy often includes new audiences and the use of the Internet. Can you share the reason behind this?

**PR:** We came in the wave of social media and, for some reason, the diasporic tendencies of Manila have made the online platform accessible. Filipino Germans, Filipino Danish, Filipino Americans, and transnational artists suddenly are gaining access to the Manila contemporary art scene – it's a rare yet welcome opportunity.

**KP:** Do you have a target audience?

**PR:** Within the culture/art educational/mobility aspect of our site, we target Filipino artists who need information on grants and funding. We also target other nationals with interest in Southeast Asian contemporary or Philippine contemporary practices. Our demographic, though, consists of artists, curators, collectors, students, and supporters of the arts in Southeast Asia and the Philippines.

**KP:** How do you fund your curatorial projects? Do you carry on your practice with institutional support or perhaps private sponsorship?

**PR:** Manila is a city whose art economy is dominated by private citizens. We have never experienced public funding, although most of our projects are geared towards nurturing contemporary practices within the public arena. The only public funding that has supported us comes from countries like Finland or Belgium with high development indexes that it's part of their government's mission to support interesting global projects like ours.

Our funding mostly is self-sustained, but on bigger projects, private citizens in Manila who are active and involved in the art community do not hesitate to support us.

**KP:** Do you consider Planting Rice a socially engaged platform? In what way do you think it engages or rather how deep is the engagement on your part?

**PR:** It was not really intentional, yet we adhere to process-based and experiential practices as such; I would say engagement is really a big part of it.

**KP:** The island nation state of the Philippines has always been known to have diasporic communities and varied cultural sensibilities all throughout the archipelago. With this in mind, as well as the

political upheavals and cultural differences of the Catholic North and the Muslim South, do you have a specific curatorial approach for each and every one of them?

**PR:** Our practice is mostly based in Manila, however something that can be related to this question is our idea of nurturing local sensibilities. A few days ago we were involved in a curatorial workshop in Bacolod City, in the Visayas Region, and invited peers from Bangkok, Singapore, and Phnom Penh to join in. Surprisingly, our sensibilities of a non-hierarchical, non-patriarchal, localized, non-Western idea of programming became the emphasis of the workshop. In line with this, it was sponsored by the VIVA EXcon—a 26-year-old biennial that is artist-run (founded by the Black Artists in Asa) and focused on supporting the artistic practices of artists within the islands of the Visayas region. This is antithetical to a more diplomatic, homogenized biennial that features almost all of the same global artists. To me the focus of non-hegemonic constructs is quite inspiring and important.

**KP:** Can you tell me about your past projects that tried to socially engage a particular community?

**PR:** More than trying to engage a particular community, we create programming that creates opportunities for spaces and discussion in various capacities. We've worked with commercial galleries by having them deal non-sellable work that can still benefit their overall programming. We've worked with a group of business owners to revitalize their area of business (Escolta, the colonial business capital of Manila); Escolta offered us an office space and in return we created programming in their beautiful but (almost derelict) art deco spaces, bringing Japanese and Filipino contemporary artists into the area. A museum archive opened up to the idea that a contemporary duo (Alice & Lucinda) would create work out of the notion of fictional archives. Artists and Artist studios opened up their spaces, so we could create a program called #Studiovisits, engaging the public in a more discursive activity as opposed to your usual gallery opening. With the social networks, we created #ArthopManila, which lists all the free art events and openings for the week. Currently we are working with a museum staff to open up the private collection and engage in a generative exhibition where the audience is invited to add to the archive. Next year, we will be working with an artist family (a family of artists), because they proposed an ecological exhibition—and we are working with

different artists exploring architecture, contemporary practices, and politics, which even includes anarchist info-shops.

**KP:** Can you tell us about your ongoing research-based show about the art archives in Manila—the one that will be exhibited at the Lopez Museum this coming September? Do you think this exhibition could serve as a model for other community-based engagement?

**PR:** The exhibition at the Lopez Museum does not really aim to serve as a model for community-based engagement. The curatorial framework, again, arose from the idea that we wanted to know more about contemporary art criticism in the Philippines and its peripheral countries. Where do we start? We've decided to make the exhibition an exploration of artistic languages that does not limit itself to academic art writing. We've included conceptual artists who engage with self-reflexivity and critique, journalists highlighting important bits of our contemporary art history, personas who have nurtured the growth of contemporary art—and within these explorations, we found art writing in several forms: in poetry, journals, scrapbooks, and curricula made by artist/educators like Fernando Zobel. We've also endeavored to create a weekly discussion group inviting artist-curators or curators to facilitate a discussion motivated by coffee; we will be using the idea of a coffee shop/reading lab to stimulate reading/workshop discussions on Philippine contemporary art. At the end of each session are text-swap sessions, so we can accumulate more text that the library we are working with can keep, for a future researcher or emerging curator. The exhibition is generative and hopes to compile significant art writing contributed by the audience/participants at the end of the exhibition.

**KR:** I'd also like to know how this project has been received? Considering that the capital has yet to fully grasp what Philippine contemporary art is about or, hell, what is it for?

**PR:** The exhibition will begin in September, so we have yet to know. We are already building the reading lab/coffee shop and everyone (especially the museum workers) are excited about (for the first time) having coffee inside the museum space haha







### Captions

- 1 Photo at Escolta Manila by Shaira Luna
- 2 Photo at the office shared with 98b at Escolta Manila
- 3 A built cafe for discussions for the exhibitions Articles of Disagreements at the Lopez Museum, 2014
- 4 Common Space/ Swarm Bibliotheque, a meeting room common point of 5 autonomous/ anarchist projects in Manila: Etnikobandido, Onsite, Marindukanon Studies Center and Infoshop, overX-out, CIV:Lab held at the UP Vargas Museum, 2015.
- 5 Archival works of fictional characters Alice and Lucinda, The UP Jorge Vargas Museum
- 6 Program titled, #Studiovisit with Australian artist Tom Dunn at 1335 Mabini
- 7 Program for social networks, #studiovisit
- 8 Offered office space in former colonial business district of Manila, Escolta, shared with artist-run 98B
- 9 Nilo Ilared, a contemporary artist with conceptual practice was featured by Planting Rice for Articles of Disagreements at the Lopez Museum
- 10 A built cafe for discussions for the exhibitions Articles of Disagreements at the Lopez Museum, 2014
- 11 Organized dinner with Japanese and Filipino Curators and artists at Terminal Garden.

**Planting Rice** is an alternative platform aimed at fostering the rise of cross-pollination among artistic communities. It distributes information on vital exhibitions, events, places and influences by art professionals in South-east Asia, Australia, the United States and Europe who maintain networks and crossovers in the Philippines.  
<http://www.plantingrice.com/>



# Questions on Community

## for Ursula Biemann, Marina Belobrovaja Oliver Ressler and Public Works

Questions on community – developed by Agustina Strüngmann, Eleonora Stassi, Kenneth Paranada, Adriana Domínguez Velasco, Dina Yakerson, students of the Postgraduate Program in Curating during the workshop for the realization of an issue on On-Curating on new social sculpture – to be addressed to the artist who participated in the exhibition “Archive of Shared Interests”, Thun 2012.

### Ursula Biemann

#### 1. In the framework of your practice, how would you define community?

**UB:** A community is a group of people who share a common attitude, cause, or interest, wherever they are located on the planet. In the context of my practice, I currently think of artists and scholars involved in political ecologies and new materialisms as constituting my narrowly defined community. My community morphs when shifting my focus onto another field of interest. My wider spanning community would include any research artists, scholars, and activists who, in critically engaging with their subject, also rework the framing and conventions of their discipline. As a consequence, my community is situated in an expanded field of art.

It frequently occurs that my field works brings me in contact with communities that are located outside my professional field of action, as for instance in my current work on nature rights in Amazonia, where indigenous communities shared their knowledge and struggles with me. These instances of overlapping communities are particularly fertile. They always emerge from intense negotiations, where territories are sensed and mapped, and common grounds elicited.

#### 2. Do you feel that locally engaged projects need to have global impact?

**UB:** There is no prescription of scope for any project. My practice specifically consists in linking micro and macro conditions, tying a planetary perspective to social and political histories on the ground. Because of this, the projects reach a world audience, but to call this global impact would seem megalomaniac.

#### 3. Are you interested in the “afterlife” of your project, when the artist goes home?

**UB:** There is no such boundary between life and art in my practice. All my projects are alive and actively doing something in the world. I’m continuously getting feedback which confirms this. Now, if you are asking if my projects also act outside their designated place in the art world, I would say yes, because they are clearly not hermeneutic projects; they often draw on live testimonies of people whose livelihoods, whose very existence, is at stake. So there is an inherent urge to publicize beyond the art context to reach communities who will use them for advocacy. If the project emerges from a combination of theoretical reflections, aesthetic considerations, and political activism in the field, it will begin circulating in these same channels at the moment of release. Some of it can be initiated by myself, a lot of it, however, will be happening without my knowing.

#### 4. Is there a relationship between socially-engaged/community arts and artistic projects that choose to engage with communities?

**UB:** I can certainly say that there is a big difference between these two notions of art interrelating with community. I speak for myself when I say that I have never thought of art having the task of changing realities for specific communities on the ground. My place of intervention has always been in the symbolic realm.

### 5. Can art have a transformative effect on a community?

**UB:** Art hopefully has an effect on the art/academic community itself. If your practice doesn't affect your own community, whom do you hope to affect? I know that by reworking discourse and image-making on the global labour of women, for instance, I had reached an entire young generation of female scholars who began to use my videos in their research. These videos also infiltrated the field of cultural geography as an expanded form of mapping and they helped cement a new community made of landscape architects, video makers and geography and media scholars sharing interests across their disciplines.

Working with members of other communities, like NGO women who are representatives of a specific local or global community, the process is always somehow transforming for both parties. They typically use my videos for their activist, lobbying, or advocacy work, and I would assume that the radically different form of representing women that my videos propose makes an impact on their community work. What I'm saying, I guess, is that when my videos reach outside its designated field, they rely on intermediary figures, some sort of agents who activate them in their circuits.

**Ursula Biemann** (born 1955, Zurich, Switzerland) is an artist, writer, and video essayist. Her artistic practice is strongly research oriented and involves fieldwork in remote locations where she investigates climate change and the ecologies of oil and water. She works the findings into multi-layered videos by connecting the micropolitics on the ground with a theoretical macro level, proposing a reflexive exploration of planetary and videographic organization.

Biemann's pluralistic practice spans a range of media including experimental video, interview, text, photography, cartography and materials, which converge in highly formalized spatial installations. Her work also adopts the form of publications, lectures, and curatorial as well as collaborative research projects. She is a member of the World of Matter collective project on resource ecologies.

Her earlier writing and experimental video work focused on the gendered dimension of migration. She also made space and mobility her prime category in the curatorial projects "Geography and the Politics of Mobility", "The Maghreb Connection", and the widely exhibited art and research project Sahara Chronicle on clandestine migration networks.

With Black Sea Files (2005) she shifts the primary focus to natural resources and their situated materiality. The recent projects Egyptian Chemistry and Forest Law examine the ecologies among diverse actors – from tiny water pollutants to major desert developers, from copper deposits to International Law. With Deep Weather and Subatlantic she engages the larger temporalities of climate change.

The artist had solo exhibitions at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein n.b.k., Bildmuseet Umea in Sweden, Nikolaj Contemporary Art in Copenhagen, Helmhaus Zurich, Lentos Museum Linz, and at film festivals FID Marseille and TEK Rome. Her work also contributed to major exhibitions at the Arnolfini Bristol; Tapies Foundation Barcelona; Museum of Fine Arts Bern; LACE, Los Angeles, KIASMA Helsinki, San Francisco Art Institute; Jeu de Paume Paris; Kunstverein Hamburg; the Biennials in Gwangju, Shanghai, Liverpool, Bamako, Istanbul, Montreal, Thessaloniki, and Sevilla; Kunstmuseum Graz; Flaherty Film Seminars, NY and many others. Ursula Biemann received her BFA from the School of Visual Arts (1986) in New York and pursued post-graduate studies at the Whitney Independent Study Program (ISP) in New York where she lived most of the 1980s. Today, she is a senior researcher at the Zurich University of the Arts. Biemann is appointed Doctor honoris causa in Humanities by the Swedish University Umea (2008) and received the 2009 Prix Meret Oppenheim, the national art award of Switzerland.

## Marina Belobrovaja

### 1. In the framework of your practice, how would you define community?

**MB:** I understand society, big or small, as a heterogeneous group that within itself combines a variety of positions and ideas for life. However, its members have agreed on a couple of ethical and juridical principles (or otherwise continuously refresh them). With this basic common understanding, despite all differences, a certain cultural unity is established, from which – I think – the central concerns of my work are nurtured.

The notion of community appears to me more binding than the notion of society, because community already implies a certain ‘we’.

### 2. Do you feel that locally engaged projects need to have global impact?

**MB:** In general terms, I have not been able to answer satisfactorily the question of the impact in society of engaged and artistic production for myself to date.

Is the desired effect reached when tangible socio-political effects can be registered in the lives of the people involved? When a project can call the attention of a broader public than just the local one to a problem, or when the problem is able to resolve itself? I do not know yet. What I am convinced of, however, is that each and every project must result from the personal involvement of its creators, independent of whether the context is more or less local or global. Thus, not out of an interest but from his/her real personal engagement. Here, we have to differentiate between the personal and the private. The private is, in contrast to the personal, not really interesting for anyone.

In addition, a project only seems effective (artistically and politically), when it manages to operate with questions and not with answers. And here also, the coordinates of the respective field are totally irrelevant (locally or globally).

### 3. Are you interested in the “afterlife” of your projects, when the artist goes home?

**MB:** Yes. And the boundary that is to be set between the private and the professional really creates big problems for me. With that I mean above all the connection and responsibility vis-à-vis those who collaborate on my projects. However, since I work

with formats other than action and performance—art publications, video projects, documentaries—I find it easier to handle the responsibility and the problematic of those boundaries. This probably has to do with the fact that the new work processes are more drawn out, that the collaboration is less excessive and that a greater continuity is assumed in the dealings and exchange with each other.

### 4. Is there a relationship between socially-engaged/community arts and artistic projects that choose to engage with communities?

**MB:** I have to admit that I have great difficulties with the expressions “socially-engaged/community arts,” because amongst other things they do not describe certain characteristics of artistic practices such as engaged, political, critical, participative, multi-disciplinary, discursive, etc., but deliver the description of a genre. I believe that this attribution or classification is not only not necessary, but also completely counterproductive because it anticipates many ambivalences, points of friction, questions, etc. It is a bit like with most of those thematic exhibitions that already want to clarify with the title what the art they exhibit is supposed to convey.

### 5. Can art have a transformative effect on a community?

**MB:** For sure! However, only in the least of cases it can, I think, immediately trigger pragmatic political changes. I am convinced, though, that it sharpens societal deficiencies and makes them more visible, nameable, and as such also more negotiable.

**Marina Belobrovaja** was born in Kiev (USSR) in 1976 and currently lives and works in Zurich, Switzerland. She studied Fine Arts at the Berlin University of the Arts, in Germany, and Fine Arts and Art Education at Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland. She is currently pursuing a PhD, researching art’s potential for social intervention at Muthesius University, in Kiel, Germany. She also works as a research fellow at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, in Lucerne, Switzerland. Her work, which spans performance and film, includes projects that thematize in a provocative but still fun way political and social and geo-political phenomena. Works include: MULTI-KULTI TOURS (2011), THE DNA-PROJECT (2012), WARM-GLOW (2013) among others.

<http://marinabelobrovaja.ch>

**Oliver Ressler****1. In the framework of your practice, how would you define community?**

**Oliver Ressler:** My work is not so much about defining, but rather about following and observing different forms of communities, especially in the framework of social movements and activist struggles that inspire me. Of course, the different communities I happened to work with—e.g. communities involved in the Bolivarian Process in Venezuela, the alter-globalization movement, or the climate-camp movement in the UK—are very different from each other, in terms of size, the basis on which they are active, technologies they use, how they organize, communicate, how they make decisions, etc. To some extent, my work consists in following these communities or movements from a position of solidarity, to create an outcome that both informs a general public about these communities but can also be used by the communities themselves for their political struggles.

**2. Do you feel that locally engaged projects need to have global impact?**

**OR:** It is already quite hard to achieve a local impact, not to speak of a global impact. And here it makes no difference if we talk about art or activist projects. In general, I guess ideally you work on something that makes sense in a local context, but also has some meaning or influence on a broader level. I think a central point for the success of coming struggles for a real democratic society is to connect these tens of thousands of local struggles that take place all around the world with each other, to define various principles and ideas that are being shared by these movements, that might also build a common base for struggle internationally. If we manage to achieve this, movements can become a central player that will not be ignored by those in power, as it is very often the case nowadays.

**3. Are you interested in the "afterlife" of your project, when the artist goes home?**

**OR:** Sure, it interests me a lot to see how people respond and react to a work after it is finished. This observation also helps me to conceptualize new projects. In those cases where I produce works in public space, I ask people to document the change the artwork might go through over the time: is it

vandalism, or how it is being used by local people and how this use might change over time? I also cannot imagine developing new artworks without having a continuous exchange with the audience. This feedback helps a lot to understand the strengths and weaknesses of certain works, and it challenges and inspires me for upcoming projects.

**4. Is there a relationship between socially-engaged/community arts and artistic projects that choose to engage with communities?**

**OR:** I don't know to which works you are referring when you set up a division between "socially-engaged/community arts" and "artistic projects that choose to engage with communities." There are so many different ways of how artists work in or with communities. I acknowledge there are quite problematic tendencies in community art, especially when the State uses art to cover over neglect of communities for which the State is responsible. I don't think art should provide social work in areas the State consciously abandons. In my opinion art should rather be used as a catalyst to set up alliances in affected communities to push back these neoliberal politics responsible for many problems. I know many regard this as utopian, but I believe in the long term it is possible to change existing power relationships, and art can have a certain role in this.

**5. Can art have a transformative effect on a community?**

**OR:** Sure, why not? There are numerous examples of local communities that organized after an initiative that came from the field of art. For example the Wyspa Institute of Art in Gdansk—the city from which I am responding to this questionnaire—helped organize their poor neighbors to claim support for the renovation of their run-down houses in the neighborhood of the shipyard from the city government. The houses had water in the cellars, while the city government was spending millions of Euros to establish prestigious projects such as the Solidarity Museum and expensive streets the people do not want just some hundred meters away. But in general I reject this hierarchical idea that artists are well informed, and the people in communities would just need to collaborate with artists to achieve change. In many of the more leftist-wing countries in Latin America, such as Venezuela, Bolivia, or Brazil, it is the movements who are the transformative actors, and the majority of people in the arts are still aligned



with the traditional system that defends its privileges the movements are trying to overcome.

**Oliver Ressler**, born in Knittelfeld, Austria, in 1970, lives and works in Vienna.

*He is an artist and filmmaker who produces installations, projects in the public space, and films on issues such as economics, democracy, global warming, forms of resistance and social alternatives. Over the years, he collaborated with the artists Zanny Begg (Sydney), Ines Doujak (Vienna), Martin Krenn (Vienna), Carlos Motta (New York), Gregory Sholette (New York), David Thorne (Los Angeles) and the political scientist Dario Azzellini (Caracas/Berlin).*

## Public Works

### 1. In the framework of your practice, how would you define community?

Community is one of those vague words like public space. They are loaded with meaning, but at the same time mean nothing due to their vagueness. It is important to be precise about who you mean when you say the word community. Is it a resident group, schoolchildren, active participants, volunteers, or proud citizens? This precision also has implications on the level and method of engagement, the effect you have on those people, the relationships you establish, and future involvement beyond the time scale of a project. The people “public works” has been involved with have ranged from very active participants to those who have only engaged briefly. Our current and future ambition is a more politicized one, where our engagement is more about mobilizing citizens into action.

### 2. Do you feel that locally engaged projects need to have global impact?

There are many locally engaged projects globally and they are beginning to connect and network with each other and learn from one another. The question to those involved in socially driven practice is: should there be more public exposure to such projects which would give them recognition or should they remain hidden so they are not hijacked by politicians, local authorities, or even commercial markets in delivering their objectives.

### 3. Are you interested in the “afterlife” of your project, when the artist goes home?

In the last three years, we have become more interested in projects that are longer term, with multiple local partnerships and networks in place so the projects can run over a longer period with local people. This way we can establish trust between the local collaborators/residents and us, and we can work with them to make an active change in their local environment. Although we are still very keen on brief open commissions and residencies, we more and more tailor their topics around ongoing longer-term projects we are engaged with at the time.

### 4. Is there a relationship between socially-engaged/community arts and artistic projects that choose to engage with communities?

This is a really tricky one, and I do believe there is a difference. However, I do think this field of art practice is not so clearly articulated with voices from other fields such as anthropology, geography, urbanism, and political sciences. Claire Bishop criticizes it in her book *Artificial Hells*, where such practices are discussed within a very insular art debate. When dealing with society and the city (locality), any practice operating in such fields needs to open its discourse to a wider multidisciplinary debate, that's where I find Bishop's position is weakened. Regarding this type of practice, I can only talk about public works in its current state: which is a practice that engages with local people who are not necessarily communities in finding ways to claim their rights to the city and its spaces. This often needs to go outside the confines of an art commission, and the artist becomes an agent, an advocate, an activist, and those roles that claim a social and spatial change in the city is where I feel the transformative role of art and art practice lies.

##### **5. Can art have a transformative effect on a community?**

This is absolutely what we are interested in. The moment art becomes transformative. The moment, where the transformative state manifests into another discipline, or acts in the political arena rather than making a commentary and when it makes an active social change. For us, this transformative state of art and art practice into a social and political action is where public works places itself currently. This is a place that we need to have more extensive debate and discussion about.

**Public Works** are an art and architecture practice working within and towards public space. All public works projects address the question how the public realm is shaped by its various users and how existing dynamics can inform further proposals. Their focus is the production and extension of a particular public space through participation and collaborations. Projects span across different scales and address the relation between the informal and formal aspects of a site. Their work produces social, architectural and discursive spaces.

Outputs include socio-spatial and physical structures, public events and publications. public works is a London based non-for-profit company. Current members are Torange Khonsari, Andreas Lang who work with an extended network of project related collaborators. The practice has been growing organically since 1999, with its initial founding members Kathrin Böhm, Sandra Denicke-Polcher, Torange Khonsari, Andreas Lang and Stefan Saffer working in different constellations until 2006 before formally coming together as public works.

**<http://www.publicworksgroup.net/>**



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**Contributors**

Marina Belobrovaja, Søren Berner, Beta Local, Ursula Biemann, Michael Birchall, Dario & Mirko Bischofberger, Fabrizio Boni & Giorgio de Finis, Eyal Danon, Altes Finanzamt, Grandhotel Cosmopolis Augsburg, San Keller, Oliver Ressler, Planting Rice, Dorothee Richter, Martin Schick, Agustina Strüngmann, Public Works

**Interviews conducted by**

Nadja Baldini, Silvia Converso, Anna Frech, Kenneth Paranada, Eleonora Stassi, Agustina Strüngmann, Adriana Domínguez Velasco, Dina Yakerson

**Proofreading**

Stephanie Carwin

**Web Design and Graphic Design Concept**

Ronald Kolb, Biotop 3000

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ONCURATING.org  
Toni-Areal,  
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8031 Zürich  
info@oncurating.org  
www.on-curating.org

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