

# Anke Hoffmann and Yvonne Volkart

## interviewed by Melanie Büchel and Jeannine Herrmann

**Melanie Buech & Jeannine Herrmann:** How has your curatorial practice developed, what is your background?

**Yvonne Volkart:** While studying I was part of the founding advisory board at the Kunsthalle St. Gallen. At this time, they did not have directors but worked with guest curators, and so I was asked to curate an exhibition. While spending one year in Vienna, I worked at the Grita Insam Gallery. This is where I started learning how to curate and work in the art scene. Aged 24 I curated my first group show with six Vienna based artists. Among them were Martin Walde and Ingeborg Strobl.

**Anke Hoffmann:** I have always been interested in art and culture, as well as in being a cultural producer. While doing Cultural Studies at University in Berlin and London, I started my own video work and also did collaborations in this field. With this experience, I began to collaborate with artistic projects. At this time there was no professional idea behind it. At the end of my studies I started working as assistant curator for the video and new media art festival Trans-Medial in Berlin, as I had this video practice. I did not particularly want to work in the art scene, but somehow got into it, as I was very interested in video and film. While working for this festival for two years, I began curating projects, and afterwards went to work in the exhibition department of the ZKM, a museum for contemporary media art in Karlsruhe.

**MB&JH:** What is your definition of curating?

**AH:** Curating is a mixture of reflecting your social and political environment, and the particular interest in artistic forms. Curating is asking about artistic and aesthetic languages speaking about the how, why and with whom, and bringing them

together under a certain perspective. Curating is reflecting visions, ideas and questions about how we want to live.

**YV:** I would say that curating is assembling people, projects, ideas and discourses. Curating is gathering these discourses, sharing and talking about them. The space is very important in curating. Curating is not the same as making a book, although the ideas can be very similar – sharing ideas and assembling them.

**MB&JH:** Is there a particular project you have been involved in that represents your position and definition of curating?

**AH:** Every project I do fits this definition. At the beginning of a project there is always a concept, which is based on a reflection or observation of the social environment. This results in bringing together artistic practices, whether it is a film program, a performance or an exhibition. It does not particularly have to be an exhibition; I also have a strong interest in special artistic practices, which may establish a present collective and shared experience. This can be a way of reflecting my interests, as well as a special artist for whose practice I would like to offer a platform. Curating is about providing a platform for exchange and discourse, for visibility and reflection.

**YV:** For me too, every project has been very important. I find it important to be part of what I curate. I define myself as a cultural producer, and do not completely understand the curator as the 'other part'. For me, the most important projects have been those in which there was a very good atmosphere with the artists, and in which new works have been produced for the exhibition. The exhibition needs to be the context, and this context should be elaborated

through extensive talks to the artists. This was especially important at the end of the 90s when I worked in the context of Cyber Feminism and digital art. During this time I was very active in this field.

**MB&JH:** Shedhalle is located right next to the RoteFabrik, a historically important institution regarding the development of the cultural scene in Zurich. Does this place, this surrounding affect your work?



**AH:** Yes, sure it does affect our work because we know the area and also the mental environment we work in. Artists, students and many other people have fought for this place in the 80s. It is a product of a very special time, of a time when people fought for political interest, and for a place where they could freely experiment with art and culture. This is part of our legacy at Shedhalle, to prevent and to work with these interests. These interests have shifted in the last 30 years but we reflect them in the way we curate, through the people we invite, and with the projects we display. We do not feature Rote Fabrik in a special way, but we do collaborate from time to time. Both institutions have their independent and autonomous projects but share the same cultural and political background.

**MB&JH:** Can you give an example for such a collaboration?

**AH:** We collaborated for the 30 years anniversary at Rote Fabrik in September 2010, and co-curated a site-specific interventionist art work by Michael Meier and Christoph Franz, with collaborative performers. The overall notion of this “anniversary” work was to celebrate the end of Rote Fabrik, as the premises had been sold to an investor and so the whole venue was turned into a building-site and therefore was hard to enter. For an earlier project we collaborated with the Fabriktheater for the Com-

plaints Choir, the first one at all in Zurich, a community project for which we collected complaints and performed these as a song at several places in the city. These were the bigger projects with the cultural producers from Rote Fabrik. Shedhalle is an autonomous association though, we are not part of the programming of Rote Fabrik.

**YV:** It is good that there are always people around we can ask. This enables us to think of art in a much broader sense than probably any other Kunsthalle or Kunstverein. Shedhalle has been originated against the dominant idea of culture. What is culture and what do we need to do in order to be engaged? I find it important to be politically engaged, not in a narrow but in a broader sense of reflecting the function of dominant as well as alternative culture in our society.

**MB&JH:** Looking at the museum landscape of Zurich, where would you position the Shedhalle?

**YV:** Shedhalle positions itself in the more experimental field. We try to be an open institution, which does not have any obligations.

**AH:** When you look at museum institutions in Zurich, they often have their own collections and work with a rather representational style, while displaying often singular positions. Beside that there are smaller project rooms we call off-space. Shedhalle once was an off-space, but has been institutionalized as we receive regular funding from the city of Zurich. Our interest is to work with artistic practices that consider themselves as part of a social or political discourse. Within our curatorial practice at Shedhalle we organize group exhibitions with a specific topic, with a statement, which we evolve. Through this social, political or philosophical bound statement we gather different artistic practices and bring them into a dialogue. I think this is quite special within Zurich based institutions. There are many interesting institutions, but many present solo exhibitions that show the latest works of an artist, that are close to the art market or to international publicity events. Shedhalle follows a working aspect: working with art and mediation, and getting into a dialogue with the audience.

**MB&JH:** Does your programme at Shedhalle differ from the programme of a Kunstverein?

**YV:** We focus on discursive group shows. There are only few Kunstvereine in Germany that also have group shows. In general Kunstvereine, or



Kunsthallen as they are called in Switzerland, usually do solo shows. This is not the cause of the Shedhalle. We do not show single positions; it is the question that is more important. But there is also a lot of intersection or overlapping between a Kunstverein and Shedhalle. The most important impulse to use is this focus on showing engaged art, on being critical.

**MB&JH:** Does your process of working follow similar structures, or is it totally different with every upcoming exhibition?

**AH:** We find our initial statement either through reflection or observation. This means that we read materials and research, visit other shows etc.. It is a mixture of societal and political issues, the points of discussion in the art world and something very personal issues working inside me or Yvonne. This first step can sometimes bubble inside for quite a long time. Sometimes it only need three months to verbalise it. Seeing artworks, either by researching, visiting artists, or by going to shows and festivals is very motivating and brings me to new ideas. Giving commission and discussing our issue with the artist is another thing. We invite them to propose an idea, which is then being discussed and finally produced. The next practical steps are very similar with every exhibition.

**MB&JH:** It is not often that an institution is run by a team. What are the advantages and difficulties?

**YV:** We are very open and we have chosen to work together. That means that we do all exhibitions together. In the past there was a team, but every curator made their own exhibitions. We find it very good to have discussions together, to be mirrored and to be questioned by the strong interventions of the others. We often have a lot of strong discussions – what we like. But often it is not so efficient. And

we also have the idea that at any moment we could overtake the work of the other. So we have complete transparency.

**AH:** The communicational part of the work is very high. You have to share, you have to discuss and come to conclusions. If you decide it by yourself, you do not have to report to somebody all the time. But it has also another aspect. A team is always much more critical, as when you work for yourself, because you put all your ideas to kind of a test with somebody else; I think this is the way is to be critical with your own ideas and ways. I think it fits very well to Shedhalle to work in this way. It is a kind of transparent pre-critical conceptualizing.

**YV:** The exhibitions we have at Shedhalle are quite big, compared with the resources we have. We do have strong concepts. The discussions bring us there. If we wouldn't discuss so much together, we would do it maybe with people from outside. That would be the other possibility, and that is also how the Shedhalle people have been working before. Discussing and sharing ideas, is a very strong idea of the Shedhalle, this is probably also one of the big differences to other Kunstvereine.

**MB&JH:** Together with Andrea Thal from *les Complices\** you have written a statement to *Kulturbotschaft 2012-2015* from the Federal Office of Culture responding to the reduction of diversity and a possible funding cut for contemporary art in the near future. How is political engagement related to your institutional work?

**AH:** We thought it is our responsibility to react to that publication of “cutting fundings” in several artistic institutions – as somebody who is working in that field and who has to take the interest of other art spaces, non-profit and also of the artist. So in a way we feel that this is a part of our responsibility, and also responsibility for the Shedhalle as well because it is an institution that comes out of this kind of off-scene, cultural scene and it is institutionalized now for many years. And results – So that your audience reflects that you take action — also if it is very little — in writing this supportive, rather critical letter.

**MB&JH:** Do you think there is an expectation that artists address political issues these days?

**YV:** I don't think so. I think the cultural sphere changed because we have a lot of these bien-

nials and festivals. And the last years politically engaged people, and people of cultural minorities, have been invited to be curators of these very important biennials and festivals and therefore much more politically engaged art has come into sight. I think people do not expect it in general. We had a market explosion over the last years. Everybody was talking about money and there are these crises of money. Lots of people feel sated with political art – they say: “oh no, not again!” – e.g. during the documentaVI.

**AH:** Shedhalle is not the only place that deals with political art, but there is always the question how you deal with it – before and afterwards. Showing something is one thing, but what kinds of dialogue do you approach/motivate to discuss about the topic. I think that is maybe what the Shedhalle faces in the future: Where is the place of Shedhalle? How does Shedhalle need to define itself? With what kind of practices? And I think how we kind of answer these questions for us, it works out.

**Captions:**

- 1 'Dumped Dreams' Gluklya: UUU N4 (Zurich), 2011
- 2 Dump Time. Für eine Praxis des Horizontalen, Shedhalle 2011

**Yvonne Volkart** is a freelance author and curator, and an instructor for art theory, cultural theory, and media theory at the Academy of Art and Design, Basel (HGK FHNW). In 2006 her dissertation *Fluid Bodies* was published at [transcript]. 2009-12 she was curator at Shedhalle Zurich. Publication: *Subverting Diasambiguities*, Nürnberg 2012, ed. by Anke Hoffmann [et] Yvonne Volkart for the association Shedalle.

**Anke Hoffmann** is a cultural scientist and works as freelance curator and author for contemporary art and is living currently in Zurich. Since 2013 she is researching on actual conditions of time and labour in contemporary society, and its implications and reflections in actual arts practice. As such she conceived a symposia on “Doing No(thing) in the Arts” at the Art School Berne, HKB. From 2009 - 2012 she was the artistic co-director and curator at Shedhalle Zurich in a team with Yvonne Volkart. They both developed an institutional program of thematic exhibitions, and discursive events, on the horizon of individualism and autonomy, community and resistance, ecology and history. In 2012 she curated the exhibition “F-Word” as an inquiry about feminism today. Between 2004 - 2009 she was a member of a collective of artists and curators called RealismusStudio at the nGbK in Berlin and conceived and curated exhibition projects such as “Tainment” (2004), “Resolution 1-3” (2006) and “The blind spot” (2008). In 2006 she was also co-curating the 7. Werkleitz Biennale Halle under the title “Happy Believers” in a team with three curator colleagues. From 2001 - 2004 she worked as assistant curator and research associate in the exhibition department of the ZKM in Karlsruhe, working on exhibitions projects like “Iconoclasm”, “Future Cinema” or “CtrlSpace” e.g. In 1999 and 2000 she worked as assistant curator and project manager, mainly on video and film art, within the art festival transmediale Berlin. Anke Hoffmann studied cultural studies, sociology and political science at Humboldt University Berlin and Goldsmith College London. Since her studies she is engaged in art, cultural and media projects.

**Melanie Büchel** has graduated in Master of Advanced Studie in Curating, Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK. She is currently Head of marketing and communication at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein in Vaduz.

**Jeannine Herrmann** is a graphic designer and curator. She has graduated in Master of Advanced Studies in Curating, Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK and is currently working as a lecturer in the Design Department of ZHdK and as the publisher of a curatorial project called Prisma Publications.