

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/>

