Heterogeneous History, a Never-ending Story
A Conversation with Martin Krenn by Katrijn Van Damme & Petra Tomljanović

Q: In your artistic practice, you often draw attention to questions concerning who has control over the conditions for the production of knowledge, values, and skills, and you demonstrate how knowledge, identities, and authority are constructed within particular sets of social relations. That is especially poignant in the collaborative curating project, "On the Tectonics of History", where you write on "How and where can the influence of history be made tangible? Which intentions or political aims underlie the images that establish our interpretation of the past?" Who, in your opinion, actually, has control over the production of knowledge?

Martin Krenn: "On the Tectonics of History" was a travelling exhibition that I curated together with Andrea Domesle and other local curators, for instance: Michal Koleček, Aneta Szylak, Frank Eckhardt.

I consider myself an artist-curator. The difference is that the job of most curators is to give an overview of several artistic positions, which are relevant for a specific topic, whereas I'm mainly interested in the communication with other artists and in digging deeper into problems that appear in my own artistic work. My social art projects are collaborative, some way they are similar to curating a show. To go back to your question: who has control over the production of knowledge? This is very important if we think about history politics. Who actually writes history? Who defines the historical conception of a country or a state? This is a question one cannot answer so easily, of course. The first thing that maybe comes to mind is that people who are/have been in power define the official historical narrative. However, there is also an ongoing engagement in history politics from below, and this engagement changes the official images of history. The history of a country is always contested. There can never be one

final historical truth; it's rather an ongoing process of searching for it. This is something we experienced very clearly in Austria after WWII.

Austria's history politics was based on the myth of being the first victim of Hitler's Germany. There was also an unofficial and hidden agreement to avoid a discussion about the role of Austrian Nazis. From1933/34 to 1938, before the Anschluss, there was an Austro-fascist government in power, which was conservative and dictatorial. This government was against Hitler and his plan that Austria should become part of the Third Reich. However, in 1938 the Austrian Federal Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg didn't give the order to defend Austria from the invading German troops. He did not want to "shed any German blood", as he said.

Although there was some opposition against Hitler in Austria, a large amount of people also greeted him and his troops. After the liberation in 1945, there was a consensus between the social democrats (SPÖ) and conservatives (ÖVP) to work together in order to establish a new Austrian self-consciousness.

The myth that Austria would be the first victim of Nazi Germany was born. In the 1970s, I still learned in school that the Germans invaded Austria against the will of the people. However, that had to change in 1986, when the newly elected Austrian president Kurt Waldheim was accused of having been involved in war crimes of the Wehrmacht. He was put on the watch list in the United States. When asked about his involvement in the Wehrmacht, he answered: "I can't remember, I did only do my duty". That statement became famous, because it was a typical example of the way in which Austria dealt with its past. But after a while, the Waldheim debate finally triggered a new understanding of the NS time and the role of the Wehrmacht in Austria. The education changed and schoolbooks were slowly but

surely rewritten. Austria had to face its own past anew. Witnesses of the Nazi era and holocaust survivors became much more recognized.

In my artistic practice, I'm interested in such rewriting processes of history and also in the question how to intervene artistically into blind spots of history.

Q: This brings us to the next question, regarding your intervention "Luegerplatz". Pierre Bourdieu mentioned that instead of just being a tool of making a difference, art should also test and provoke the tolerance level in the society. Making a reflection on the actions such as long-lasting project of Luegerplatz, where you were involved in questioning historical narratives and invited artists to participate with their responses on the figure of 19th-century Viennese mayor Karl Lueger, the project lasted almost four years. What is the current situation with it?

MK: In this project, students of my seminar and I were questioning the role of Karl Lueger as a "father figure of Vienna" by pointing to his populist method of utilizing anti-Semitism. Lueger was the mayor of Vienna from 1897 until 1910. Historians consider him the first successful European politician who actually won elections with populist anti-Semitic propaganda. His rhetoric was also interesting for us because—unfortunately—Austrian politicians use similar slogans in their election campaigns nowadays. Lueger is called the "founder of modern Vienna", and he also founded the Christian Socialist Party in 1893. This was the forerunner of the ÖVP, which is part of the Austrian government today. His anti-Semitism is historically proven, but the argument to defend him is that everyone was anti-Semitic at this time…

So, in 2008 we developed an intervention in the public space, and our target was the large monument of him at Stubenring in Vienna. We made an international open call to redesign the Karl Lueger monument into a monument against anti-Semitism and racism in Austria. The rector of the University of Applied Arts and historians as well as artists joined us. In the end we received 220 proposals by international artists, architects, and students. Finally, the proposal by Klemens Wihlidal was chosen by an international jury. The idea of this winning proposal was that the statue and the part of the base are to be tilted 3.5 degrees to the right. This submission was chosen because it reflected the City of Vienna's irresoluteness in dealing with Lueger as well as Vienna's

anti-Semitic past. By disrupting the vertical character of the monument, this intervention seeks to challenge the myth of Lueger.

The pressure group that consisted of us, the Jury, and professors as well as students of the University of Applied Arts pushed for implementation. It is important to note that this was not an official open call by the city government, it was based on the idea of my students from the seminar, and it was launched with a lot of outside support. When the winning proposal was presented to the city government, it was also simultaneously presented to the public. But the current mayor of Vienna declared that the most he could imagine was to put up a small plaque at the monument to contextualize its history. However, to date there is no such sign at the monument. During the election campaign in 2010, the Green Party had spoken out for the redesign of the monument. But the new cabinet—a coalition between the Green Party and the Social Democrats—did nothing. Nevertheless, we published a handbook to redesign the monument in 2011, along with guest comments that put the project in a theoretical and artistic context and also presented all of the 220 proposals.

What happened next was a real political manifestation, namely the re-naming of the Lueger ring, not far from this monument, one of the most important streets in Vienna. Given that there was so much protest around our project and because the University no longer wanted an address containing the name Lueger, the Viennese government finally decided to rename this street the Universität Ring.

Q: Could we measure the success of a certain artistic practice in the public context? Is it achievable to overcome the rhetoric as a possible outcome of socially engaged art? What is the actual value of such practices, both immediately and in the long-term?

MK: We can say that, although the redesign of the monument hasn't been realized, we have managed to actively shape history politics by means of art and have expanded the current debate on memory politics. Also, one result of this debate among other debates and initiatives is that there is a growing consciousness about the problematic anti-Semitic past of Vienna that can be located prior to the Nazi period. Five years after we launched our open call, the name Karl Lueger is seen much more critically—even in mainstream discourse. This project operated at the interface of art education, history and activism, and artistic practice. If you follow the project and how it

progressed, it reveals how art in the public sphere can prevail through commitment and activism, but it also indicates where its limitations are. So, it can be considered a success, but it is generally difficult to measure the political impact on society.

For me, it is important to make a distinction between socially engaged art that wants to change something concretely and socially engaged art that has a political and utopian aim. Some projects want to intervene in the social context by pursuing concrete change within a given timeframe. In Zurich, for instance, in 1994, WochenKlausur was invited by the Shedhalle to realize a project about drug issues. They made it possible to arrange a shelter for drug-addicted women and sex workers, which was open during the day. This was a concrete social intervention realized in the timeframe of eight weeks, and it was successful. Yet, other social art projects have no concrete outcome; some of them "succeed" in only posing interesting questions. The Lueger project also had some concrete results such as the renaming of the Lueger Ring, but at the same time it posed questions, which are equally important for me as an artist: What can you do as an artist when you want to intervene into the public realm, what forms of collaboration and participation are necessary and what are your limits? Should we differentiate between symbolic political actions and long-term proceedings with several actors in an artistic dialogical setting? How can such strategies and artistic methods be combined?

As an artist you can take part in the discourse, and your actions may become political to a greater or lesser extent. You have the possibility to create artistic interventions by doing something that normally no one else does. Having said that, socially engaged art differs significantly from social work, but also from activist campaigning, because it creates its own criteria and approaches the social space aesthetically.

Q: In your work "Memory in (Post-)Totalitarianism" (2010–2012), you differentiate between several forms of memory. Why is this important for you? What is considered a heterogeneous social space?

MK: I'll try to give a short explanation about the differentiation between cultural and collective memory as described by Aleida Assmann[1]. Social, national, and cultural memory depends on the duration, emotional intensity, and the degree of institutionalization. To keep a complex theory short: the idea of social memory is that no one is alone with his or her memories. Each human being is influenced by

events in the distant past (the story of your grandmother or grandfather, the history lessons that you had at school). What is stored in the social memory is thus most easily forgotten, as it is passed on mainly orally. As long as a group continues to communicate about the experience, those social memories are upheld. However, Assmann explains that this memory dies along with its living carriers.

The national memory, also called the collective memory, lasts longer than the social memory. This is exactly taught at schools and celebrated (national holidays), and it is often based on myths.

The third type of memory is the cultural memory that is archived on paper, in books, music, DVDs, and films and basically in our libraries, museums, and archives. So this is the cultural approach to history. Each generation redefines its approach and, as I said before, sometimes a shift in perspectives happens. In 1986, when the scandal around President Waldheim took place there was a demonstration with a Trojan horse that was constructed by Alfred Hrdlicka, a quite famous Austrian artist. It symbolized how Austria dealt with its past at this time, and his intervention is now part of our cultural memory. History and the past understood as a fluent process are based on social memory, cultural memory, as well as the national memory.

In the work "Memory in (Post-)Totalitarianism", I undertook a photographic journey to different sites of history. Through monuments, archives, museums, and memorials I followed the traces of evolution and change of historical images in totalitarian and post-totalitarian societies. Thereby, I examined the role of memorials, movies, and historical novels and how they construct collective and cultural memory. I visited official and unofficial memorials and focused on their different strategies of design and transmission. Central sites among others that I have investigated in Romania were the Sighet Memorial, the Central Archive of the Securitate, a base for a bust of Antonescu and the Holocaust Memorial in Bucharest, and in Germany the Buchenwald memorial, the Buchenwald monument/the group of figures by Fritz Cremer, and the former Gauforum at Weimar. The resulting exhibition consisted of a photo series and a three-band audio and slide installation.

Q: Now we can say that we are again writing history with these massive numbers of immigrants

entering Europe. Can we still use those terms in the current situation?

MK: Europe is indeed writing history, and it is important that the previous history of refugees and immigrants in Europe will be written anew.

Part of Austria's and Germany's history is a more or less hidden history of the "Gastarbeiter". This is the German term for a guest worker. In the 1950s and 1960s, people were invited to come and work in Germany and Austria. They were told, "You can work here, you can send the money home, but after a certain time we want you to leave". That was the opposite of integration. On the other hand, if we compare this with the situation of undocumented workers, then these people at least got their documents and had civil rights. It is important when we discuss the current situation to think back and ask: what was the image of immigrants in the past? How were immigrants treated? What were the mistakes and what were the missed opportunities? Eventually a lot of these guest workers stayed in Austria and Germany, and many of them finally got citizenship. Although there was structural discrimination involved, the story of the "Gastarbeiter" is also a "success story" in/for Germany and Austria. How would our society look like without them? This idea of differentiating between human beings because of their origin and the sharp distinction between political and economic immigrants must be radically questioned. I think one should learn from history, and consequently there should be a positive approach to the refugees of Syria and other people entering Europe, especially if they want to stay here. I think that it is a great chance for Europe, and it is not something that one should fear. If the right steps were taken and European immigration politics was based on principles such as diversity, equality, freedom to stay, and solidarity, then this would be a great opportunity for Europe.

Q: In 2005, Marion von Osten[2] used the term "shuttle migrants" for this group of workers you mentioned. We now use "migrant" for newcomers and on the other hand the middle- and upper-class are mostly called "expats". Thus, those definitions awaken certain images and prejudices. How can we think in and of redefined terms or narratives, loosened from any association or connotation, which would allow an empowering vision of personal geopolitics?

MK: Although I think that language is an important political tool, I honestly don't believe so

much in the importance of certain terms anymore. Nevertheless, sometimes it is necessary and really important to fight for change in language, for example the term "guest worker" exactly describes how these people were treated. They were aware of their status, and they knew what it meant to be a guest worker. Especially when you were born in Austria and your parents were "guest workers". You were always excluded from the majoritarian society to a certain extent. It also depends how you use a term. Unfortunately, it is often not enough to exchange one term with another.

However, to give a positive example, there was this group in Germany called "Kanak Attak"[3] that was actually a kind of label that fundamentally challenged the status of immigrants and guest workers. They questioned from a post-migrant perspective concepts such as "integration", "assimilation", "being German" by claiming "We are all Kanaken". They took the negative notion of "Kanake" and turned it to the opposite. They were very critical about multiculturalism and the idea of a national identity. I think their texts as well as interventions are still quite pertinent nowadays because they show a way to overcome the constructed division between people due to their "origin" or "culture". There is a belief in different cultural backgrounds, but do they really exist as such or are they just a form of stigmatization?

Although I have an Austrian cultural background and the schools that I visited clearly had an influence on me, I also don't want to be defined as a typical "Austrian". There are a lot of clichés and ideas about Austrian society with which I don't want to be associated. The same can apply, for example, to Turkish or Kurdish immigrants. Some of them, especially from the second generation, don't want to be stigmatized as being "Turkish" or "Kurdish", even though they may have positive feelings about their own cultural background.

In the avant-garde there was this approach "not to be an artist". The idea was to get rid of the rules of bourgeois art. I still believe that an artistic practice should avoid being artistic in that sense. The "non-identification" or "non-identity" is an important concept in modern art. Therefore, I am arguing for a non-identitarian approach to politics in art. This idea becomes also relevant in the concept of solidarity. Oliver Marchart[4] talks about the idea of post-identitarian solidarity where you can show your solidarity with groups without being part of them.

Consequently, you can also question your own identity. Additionally, I can be in solidarity with someone with an Islamic background although I personally may be agnostic or atheistic. In my dissertation, the concept of non-identiarian solidarity is one of the key criteria to define "the political" in social art practices.

Oliver Marchart gives the example of acting in solidarity with people who fight apartheid: it would have been rather thoughtless to tell the African National Congress (ANC) that they should not engage in any form of identity politics. Non-identitarian solidarity means the opposite; the idea is to show solidarity and to question one's own identity but not to tell others that it would be false to fight for/with their identity. On the contrary, self-empowerment as well as identity politics is essential in political struggles and, depending on the situation, it is important to support it.

As an artist, I believe in aesthetic autonomy, which demands from the artist to get rid of stigmatization and paternalism in all of these facets. One of the key elements in art is the search for the essence of a human being. It can only be pursued seriously if we try to disconnect and become estranged from our own identity. Thus, freedom of art means to oppose any form of (literal and metaphorical) imprisonment of people on the basis of their origin.

Captions

1 Wiener Festwochen 2015: Students of the Culinary School Judenplatz, Vienna (GAFA) joined forces with visual artist Martin Krenn to develop a memory project around the former Hotel Metropole. Photograph: © Martin Krenn, 2015.

2 Hall of the nation, Gauforum (today: Weimarer Atrium), Weimar, 2010: Inmates of the concentration camp Buchenwald were forced/obliged to work on the construction site. Photography (102x136 cm) from the photo-project "Memory in (Post-)Totalitarianism". © Martin Krenn, 2010.

Notes

1 German professor of English, Egyptology, Literary, and Cultural Studies.

2 Movements That Matter: The Projekt Migration (2003-06).

3 "Kanake" is an insulting term in German for a migrant coming from the south. This group of women and men from the second generation of immigrants was a post-migrant initiative. For the

home page with their manifesto (1998) in German, English, Turkish, and French, see: http://www.kanak-attak.de/ka/about.html.

4 Austrian sociologist and political philosopher, currently at the Vienna Art Academy. One of his main research topics is post-structuralism.

Martin Krenn (b. 1970/AT) is an artist, curator, and lecturer at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. He graduated with a degree in Electronic Music at the Viennese University of Music and Performing Arts in 1996 and holds an M.A. from the University of Applied Arts, Vienna, obtained in 1997. From 2006 to 2009, he served as chairperson of the Austrian Artists Association (Fine Arts). Since 2011, he has been a PhD researcher at the University of Ulster, Faculty of Art, Design, and the Built Environment in Belfast. Martin Krenn has had numerous international exhibitions; his work is represented by Galerie Zimmermann Kratochwill, Graz.

Petra Tomljanović (b. 1985/HR) is a curator, journalist, and educator in the area of art, design, architecture, and expressive therapy. She graduated with a degree in art history and literature from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb and Expressive Arts Therapy from the European Graduate School in Saas Fee (CH). She currently lives in Zurich and studies at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK.

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