

Rainer Ganahl

interviewed by Katharina Schendl and Ingela Johansson

Katharina Schendl and Ingela Johansson:

Would you describe your work as an anti-capitalist art production?

Rainer Ganahl: I don't think in these terms.

What is "capitalist" and what is "anti-capitalist"? We all live in an economic order that requires financial sandwiching but we should not allow financial witchcraft with sand, as we had it with the recent supreme mortgage crisis to name just one obvious example. Banking that serves people is necessary, but rogue banking that privatizes profits and leaves losses and bailouts to the general public is unacceptable.

Some aspects of my work as an artist address these issues, but I try to refrain from taking positions: I just observe and replicate the language used in it, as it is political or financial. Currently I'm doing Credit Crunch Meals, informed by daily financial news which is often obscene and hideous. I find it necessary to cope with this often obscene economic injustice, with real effects on people's lives, and add some of mine, made of perishable food – a very direct way to counter the abstract world of high and not so high finance and politics.

Now, does the fact that I deal also with capitalist or anti-capitalist aspects make my work capitalist or anti-capitalist? It is really up to the beholder. People can read it the way they want, but the moment somebody buys something from my Credit Crunch Meal Series (let's say a potato in the shape of a misshaped dick with a life span of five to fifteen days, depending on your tolerance for rotten food) we would enter capitalism.

If the collector waits to the end of the show, he could eat it or have it moulding in the fridge. These food pieces are given away for free, are made for consumption or for one day display only. Franz West wanted my Lenin carved into a piece of Bergkäse from my MAK performance. He stored it for some

months in his freezer, but eventually I had to rescue it in a pretty dire state. I am not even sure where it is right now, but I asked my Brussels gallery – where we showed it deformed after four months over the due date without refrigeration – not to trash it. It is now in some kind of do it yourself Mausoleum in various bags and canister, if no cleaning person trashed it unauthorized.

But since I don't want to cater just to anti-capitalist forces in our society, who sympathize with one-way art – meaning: immediately disposable perishables – I also have some of my veggie-stars rendered immortal with porcelain.¹ These sculptures are made for the table and are used to stimulate participation by the host and all dinner guests. You are free to recombine and sculpt everything around them, most preferably money symbols, company logos or business news headlines.

KS&IJ: If you give the production the same value as the artwork, is the production more democratic than the art itself? Who is included in the production?

RG: Let me be very frank: I don't produce any value. As an artist I only make art and propose something that can be valued or trashed. The circulation, the acceptance or the refusal of what I do determines the value of my work. I am not the one who decides this: it's the curator, the collector, the critic, and the beholder. Concerning democracy in art, I just mentioned that my porcelain renderings are utterly democratic since a collector is invited to add his own food creations next to it: s/he should sculpt out of his/her sausage some kind of sexual organ (for example) in whatever realistic or unrealistic way. But democracy starts already simply by participating in all these games. As you know, if we are in China, we might run very early into trouble as did Ai Weiwei.

KS&IJ: To make changes, should artist leave the 'art world' or is it possible to make changes from inside the art system? Or is it an illusion? In what sense does that have an impact on the local and the global, on which scale?

RG: Again, it is not the artist who stays or leaves the system. It is the art system that accepts or rejects somebody and the artist is mostly powerless and can barely influence it apart from making good or bad work. Now, am I in the art system or outside it? Do I get fancy invitations by museums, which I have to turn down like a Cattalan, or not? I of course, don't. So I don't have this problem of being in or out of something that is so abstract and so bizarre and so impossible to manipulate. Most of my works I have made in the fringes of the art world, with money coming only from institutions if any. Do I feel squeezed and corrupted by the system? I wish! (joking) Nobody really cares and nobody tries to influence me, to "buy me" or "corrupt me." Success is the illusion and the problem. But relative failure to paddle through that world of money and influence is pretty healthy and has served me so far well. I have relative little storage problems from over production, no collapsing prices, no illegal Swiss account problems, not too many scheduling conflicts. I have barely had to turn down any invitation, and I don't need assistance for emailing and phone answering. I even can enjoy answering questions to students of curatorial studies in the middle of the afternoon without creating an unmanageable work backlog. I don't have to worry too much about what I say and can even right away publish it on my web site, in the end my only outlet for my work.

So in short, concerning the art world - or lets say the art village or art enclosure - there is nothing to run away from for the majority of artists and there is really no big impact to have in case someone becomes megalomaniac and wants to change something. The fact that nearly everybody runs after the same few artists at a relatively short-lived given moment is something that no artist can change. Independent of whether this effect is called fashion, herd instinct or something more colloquial, it is wide spread and indeed is not anymore limited to local borders but is global. If somebody really wants to have an impact in this world one has to resist these systems, ignore them. To sum it up in a very naïve but illustrative and pedestrian way: If you go to an opening, you feel stupid; if you stay at home, they feel stupid.

KS&IJ: Is it important to define a practice in order to be great at something, or is it to be clear with what you engage in?

RG: It depends what you understand by practice. Speaking of myself I do what I like to do and stay within my confines but if you click through my web site (ganahl.info) you see that I do many things. Are they related? Yes and no, depending again on what kind of a perspective you take.

When does somebody become great at something? When real love and intrinsic interest and relevance in something enter the game... Why are you really dealing with art?

KS&IJ: In your essay *When attitudes becomes - curating* (2004). What is your position here in relation to autonomy and commodification of objects is there an element of cynicism involved in this statement – playing with the artist as post-Fordist-working force? Or, how is this not counterproductive to anti capitalism?

RG: Currently, nobody produces anything for me with the exception of someone finishing up my porcelain production for which I have to pay all by myself without really a show waiting. When I wrote that I was really in a big production jungle with plenty of war shows – so people had to paint for me, work on ceramic tiles, make drawings and many more things – it was a bit as if I had to counter the madness of the Iraq war with the madness of heavy hands on productions.²

Of all that stuff, NOTHING, really nothing sold. I do still have the entire production scattered all over the place and pay for storage. Some of that stuff has also been taken hostage by the court system (I won the process after six years in court); some by a gallery that doesn't want to return it and some by the elements (badly stored). Some of the paintings are rolled up and blocking my way to the bed and I bump into them every evening and every morning.

It was my choice to engage in this excess and I enjoyed it a great deal. Did I compromise my autonomy as an artist and committed the crime of commodification of objects? I don't think so, since it all was purely made to communicate and not to sell. The results were unfortunately on my side: nobody in the end purchased anything. This is may be a good example to explain my logic of "moderate failure" as the best recipe for success because had I sold works

at the time I might really have produced much more and that could have been really traumatic and kept me from moving on. Look, now with my self-financed porcelain stuff: I have to pay it myself and only make what I really want and love and what I can afford and not for any market demand. Thus, things are kept in check. Post-Fordism is of course our 'condition humane' wherever we look whether we like it or not. For the records, the artist almost never was a Fordist producer even though some Asian artists tried to prove the opposite.

KS&IJ: The artist is often invited to transform a space. They make a similar reading of the environment as curators. The artists are often producers and organizers of their own work, so there are elements of curating skills already implicit in their work, we guess that is what you mean by: "Curators start to interfere and compete with artists in the artistic decision-making process", what do you see in regard to this power-relation in an exhibition making process – how can it be fruitful? Or do you think it is possible to make resistance towards becoming instrumentalised? Do you draw the line when you negotiate your work condition and set up a framework in the dialog with the curator?

RG: Artists are of course curating their own works but this shouldn't be reversed in the sense you seem to flirt with: we don't need curators making decisions that are artistic. I really meant what I wrote. I just got a call by an artist friend of mine, who complained how difficult it was to work with a specific curator who all the times tried to interfere and make important decisions. Since I am not involved in this case I don't mention names but recently, one of my really bad experiences was at the MAK, Vienna with Baerbel Vischer who was really trying to interfere all the time telling me not only what I can show and what not but also what I can produce and what not. This concerned drawings and was not a cost issue but an issue of power.

Now, the relationship between curators and artists is already well defined in your question: the curator invites and sets up the framework in which the artist does his/her work. Now, there is no linear system that tells you this is art and this is context and of course, contexts define works. But the fine line has to be negotiated before hand and during the work. If an artist complains badly one should start listening, and vice versa. If a curator complains the artist also better listens. Money and general resources too are issues that always cause tensions. It is a good idea to

negotiate upfront those limits and get an idea whether the artist's intention might fit or not. But sometimes, some people just don't get it.

Needless to say, the best curatorial work is the one that makes the impossible possible, which encourages solutions that seem out of the budget, out of time, out of reach. There is also a need for curators who are flexible when it comes to last minute changes. Artists while installing for better outcomes can often intuitively cross fixed minds, on standard results. Once in place, the situation might change and it is of so much help if a curator tries to understand what the alternative is instead of insisting on previous plans that might not even really work.

Due to previous misunderstandings – which as such is not a problem - Baerbel Vischer got the numbers wrong, on the placement of three windows. Once I was in Vienna, I immediately corrected the positioning of the new windows but the lady simply refused as if it would be technically impossible, as if it would cost most more money, as if I had nothing to say. The carpenter in place and ready to go, she made such a huge scene – including screaming and yelling at me - that they nearly cut it on some non-sense level. Only once I got a minute to explain it to the carpenters, who immediately also opted for my placement directions, was the worst solution avoided. From that moment on, nearly every decision became a big problem and I was working with a woman who wanted to cross me on every corner. Needless to say, the catalogue, part of the contract with the MAK, was finally made impossible and the working relationship was poisoned throughout the process. Substantial additional money and help which I organized for a 200 page catalogue was not able to flow to the production of the publication directly but was supposed to go to the MAK's internal catalogue division creating almost no difference on their proposed 60 page version. The resulting conflict of that ended with no publication and most of the support money lost. When Noever, for whom Vischer worked, and who she turned against me, finally was kicked out of his job due to corruption, I knew what they were talking about. A curator who used the best and most spacious room a museum has to offer as only their office – an office of the size of the Reichskanzlei on the Beletage – had to pack his things up and leave in shame.

KS&IJ: When you were studying at the Whitney Program you mentioned that art is something that takes place outside the reading room, away from

the intellectual discussions in the class. Art was only one optical device to look outside our windows". Can you shortly explain this relationship between art and theory again?

RG: Maybe one day I have to re-read and may be rewrite that essay. The relationship between art and theory is of course a complicated one but not one that is impossible to manage or one that needs to lead to headaches, though it can. Well, for beginners, let's say that there is art here and theory there. Let's insist on a division of labour and a difference in context. Let's also assume practical differences, reading, writing and speaking here, art making there, even though that in terms of practice the overlapping starts meanwhile rather sooner than later.

But let's first focus on the structure of compensation, which lets art making be much better financed for less actual work. If writers - and even curators - don't find ways to get paid with artworks, they are awaiting a poor life even if they are successful. The golden parachute is of course the nearby university or the museum or Kunsthalle since I don't want to speculate on the attractiveness of fine minds for better-off partners - also a way to find compensation for theoretical work. If somebody still wants to erase the differences between theory and art then just let's look at the income gap between a successful international artist and a successful international writer or theoretician.

OK, let's be a bit more precise: I myself belong to one of the earliest Kuenstler-creatures who practiced work with the pure mind and wanted to sell it as dirty art work. By the way I still keep doing so. But I understood very early on, that I needed to drop out of my PhD program in philosophy and write for magazines if I wanted to be taken seriously as an artist. So meanwhile, it is part of an academia of young artists who incorporate readings, writings, talks and other forms of knowledge products into their practices. They love to be coached by theoreticians and implant them like trees right into their works. Books in German contemporary art are what once chairs represented: the ideal artistic prop to be meditated upon, the perfect muse to be found in nearly all group shows in the last couple of years. And so do curators. The next Documenta tours as publication event, with the curator as editor in chief. We get 100 notebooks from a spectral mixture of fine minds that serve like streetlights for something bigger to come.

In art school too, a theoretical turn has taken place and introductory classes must include now theory as well as nude drawing and human anatomy. On the more perverse end we see now PhDs made in fine art, the academization of a practice that by definition never wanted to be a "Doctor of Philosophy" but rather its sick, hallucinating patient. In Holland entire art schools turned into research labs engaging with vocabularies that made you wonder whether art was still on anybody's mind. In all this happiness with cross overs the basic formal for definitions and distinctions still remains that one offered by a simple speech act: This is, or this is not. I accept it as art, or as theory if I am told so but in spite of its eloquent uttering or less eloquent stuttering it is again up to the beholder, reader, listener, or consumer and purchaser to decide whether it's good art or good theory we are encountering, or engaged with.

So what is the relationship between art and theory: It is what it is, it is what it wants to be, and it is what it claims to be? But only one really one of the two walks away well paid. Only one gets into the platinum and diamond mileage programs. Only one gets the saying when I come to plastic speech. And usually it's the loud voice with less content that tries to instrumentalize the other and not so much the other way around.

One of my first topics I seriously was studying when I entered university was that between theory and practice by the Adorno, Horkheimer, Marx and Habermas. It was a very important topic and our self-interest sympathized with the fusion of these two in order to look like workers, in order to minimize the gap between the classes and in order to get a voice that can be heard across divisions. Marx's eleventh Feuerbach thesis: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it", was like a coronation, an ecstatic light at the end of a tunnel. We too are part of the working population, and we recognize the theoretical aspect in any kind of work, independent of whether it is lapidary or not. But somehow, in the current climate of theory and art exchange I want to more focus on the differences and insist on them. I am almost more interested in keeping the divide for real and not pretend that it doesn't exist. Whenever I meet a real critic, writer or curator who is without an institution and outside the machine and outside school for more than 10 years, my respect grows exponentially, if they keep it up, if their criticality is still vibrant and lucid. I don't want to see them in bed with silly artists and project managers.

KS&IJ: The constant study-project, your study of language as a way of criticising Imperialism and Eurocentric traditions. Is this a life learning process? Do you also translate your artistic process into a life-learning project? When does an artwork start and when does it end? Is it on going machine, a practice of production, what could make you stop?

RG: Yes, it is a life long process and yes, it keeps me alive. Its part of an anti-Alzheimers regime that hopeful keeps me focused for many, many years to come. When does an artwork start and when does it end? The answer is simple again: When an artist says so and somebody believes it – or has no other choice but doing so. Yes, language acquisition is an on-going bio-machine with social effects. For me, it also creates a context in which works of art can be created. It is not the learning itself that becomes art it is the learning that creates a context for art making in which anything might be allowed and justified as art products. Since I elaborated on this in many other places, I keep it short: when will it come to an end. Hopefully never but needless to say, depending on my occupations and daily obligations I have seen better times studying. I am currently focussing on Chinese and still need another 10 years and hopefully many months in China, something I am not necessarily able to come by right now. Learning is not only about critique, but also about understanding and change.

KS&IJ: Quoting from your essay, *When attitudes becomes curating* (2007): “We more and more see now also artists collecting, curating, writing and dealing as well as collectors, writers and curators making art and reflecting about artistic production in the role of writers and art historians.” It is interesting how you distribute your own works. Mr Ghislain Mollet-Vieville received many postcards with phrases “Please, teach me...”, which in a way is forming a body of a private collection. This means you take control over the perception and value system - making your own choices - that will have a collection of your art works. Could you elaborate more on the role of the collector and your work in relation to distribution systems?

RG: Well, you see this in a correct way. “Please, teach me ... “ was not only a about an impossible request, a solicitation for help but also an enunciation, an indexical reminder of a practice of mine, that is superimposed with practicality and meaning, learning and art. But you are only partially right in your second assumption concerning collecting. Giving something away for free doesn't guarantee

that somebody really keeps the stuff received. In many cases they don't. A payment structure is a better guarantor for a presence in a collection than something that doesn't come at a cost. I do have some collectors but not many. Ghislain Mollet-Vieville is a man I really appreciate and we did work together on a couple of projects but I wouldn't look at him as a collector of mine since he never bought anything of mine. Unfortunately, I have very few collectors and they haven't really played a role in the production and distribution of my work. There are only two exceptions: Generali Foundation, Vienna and the Uni-Credit Collection, Milan / Vienna. Both have works of mine in their collections and have extended invitations for exhibitions that led, and have led to much more than just a work for sale. Only galleries or institutions have been playing that role for me.

KS&IJ:]We disagree with your statement that a curator has to defend artists. Don't you think that the job description is a different one? Does the curator not circle more around the relationship between art and audience, in which language they are, if so, able to talk, look, love or hate each other?

RG: I say that and mean it, but I don't say that the only function of a curator is to defend an artist. But simply showing an artist is a way of defending an artist. Curating is of course a very complex story that also doesn't need a job description. It is mostly defined while on the job and can consist of nearly anything. I would not even exclude toilet cleaning and prostitution to name just some extremes. Of course, sex work is not a normal part of curatorial work but it could occur given certain circumstances. In well defined places curatorial job expectations might fit given profiles easier than on the field out in nowhere where audiences have to be first established and art explained as if talking to children.

Institutions are not things that exist as such, they also have to be negotiated and re-established anew once protagonists change and they are in perpetual change. The mobile is the basic structure of anything we are involved with. Today, you might be just the moister of one of the hanging weights but in a couple of years your situation might transform an entire arm. In fact it will, it has to change and your time will come.

Interview conducted in New York, November 8, 2011.



Notes

1 <http://www.ganahl.info/crunchporcelain>

2 See <http://www.ganahl.info/iraqdialogs.html>
and <http://www.ganahl.info/morenews.html>

Rainer Ganahl (born 1961) is an Austrian born artist. His work consists of photographs, videos and performances. From 1986 until 1991, he studied at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna (Peter Weibel) and the Kunstakademie Duesseldorf (Nam June Paik). He was a member of the 1990/91 Whitney Museum Independent Study Programme in New York. His best known work, *S/L (Seminars/Lectures)*, is an ongoing series of photographs, begun in 1995, of well-known cultural critics addressing audiences. The photographs, taken in university classrooms and lecture halls, not only show the lecturer but also the listeners and students in the audience. In a similar way, he documented his own process of learning an "exotic" language (e. g., Basic Japanese) into an art project. In his *Imported-Reading Seminars* held from 1995 onward, the group study of theoretical works from specific countries were documented on video. His latest exhibition studied the linguistic diaspora of Jewish immigrants. Rainer Ganahl represented Austria at the 1999 Venice Biennale.