

# Saša Nabergoj

## in conversation with Jill Keiser

*Saša Nabergoj is working in the field of contemporary art as a curator, writer, editor and lecturer. In her presentation at the Kunstverein Zürich (Wäscherei) 30st September 2011, she pointed out among other things, the importance of laziness, which would lead into a productive laziness as she is convinced. In this interview she explains more explicitly what is missing if there is no time for laziness. What she is trying to get out of a discourse about laziness and Saša Nabergoj is giving an insight in the artistic scene of Ljubljana, the economic situation artists are living in Slovenia and what role she believes the curator has in the collaboration with artists.*

**Jill Keiser:** Your presentation was about laziness. How important is the topic to you?

**Saša Nabergoj:** Ever since I started my professional career in the world of art I have been faced with a demand for multiproduction. In midst 90's I came across Mladen Stilinović text *The Praise of Laziness*, and since then I have slowly and lazily worked on the subject of laziness, idleness in historical, political, ideological contexts and backgrounds that contributed to the bad connotation the word has in today's society. My research intensified last year (2010), so my presentation here aimed at giving you a short introduction to alternative; counter-discourse on laziness as opposed to prevailing discourse based on work. I strongly believe such issues are, especially today, very relevant for artistic and curatorial practices. When you are just rushing to produce things you don't have the time to think.

Ivan Minatti, Slovenian poet from XX. Century, once explained his creative process: "I can spend the whole day laying on the sofa and in the evening I might get an idea for a poem or I might not." He didn't publish much, but what he did was brilliant. I myself am usually getting the best ideas when I'm walking in the forest or just doing nothing.

So what I want to say is, that we need time to let go and be open to ideas. When you are involved in creative work, you can't rush from one point to the other, what unfortunately we sometimes are forced to do.

**JK:** Would you call yourself a lazy person in that sense?

**SN:** The problem with laziness is, that in a society based on value of work it acquired bad reputation. As for myself I am aware that I'm contradictory. When you're talking about laziness you're active. It's this contradiction that makes it interesting - this productive un-production.

I reflect a lot about working, how I do things. And I create for myself hubs of productive laziness – how I call it. For instance taking enough time to talk to artists, or people in general, for hours.

**JK:** Do you think it is important that an artist lives the laziness?

**SN:** Yes, but not just the artist – the curator too. There was an American analysis on working conditions of artists in the 90's, that showed that an average artist uses up to 80% of his time on managing the career: Going to the openings, networking, arranging documentation, portfolios, the CV, etcetera. So actually there is only 20% time left to work as an artist. So, yes it is very important that you have this time that allows you to create, not just to produce or manage.

**JK:** How you bring laziness and organized life work balance together?

**SN:** I'm not sure if I manage it always well. I organize time to be lazy, which is very contradictory. But now, I think, is the busiest time in my life. I have two small kids that I want to see growing up, an interesting but demanding career and there are also my husband, friends, fiction, sports,...

Curatorial residences can be a really nice organized way to practice laziness. On the respective visit of Zurich, as well, I deliberately stayed for a few extra days to allow me time to research the scene a little bit. Which is actually organized time for discussions with artists, curators and as I planned it carefully, not to rush from one venue to another. I had a lot of time in-between, time for unplanned long talks (if they would happen) with artists. That's what I call organized laziness. But there is of course the other less encouraging perspective. In Ljubljana there is this tendency to do more and more work, for less and less money. So you can't really escape this overproduction, as you cannot operate outside of general working conditions. But I always try to balance my life.

**JK:** For you what is the essence of the discourse about laziness?

**SN:** It's the reflection of the *modus operandi*. It is also the question how and why society is governed by the work ethic. Bertrand Russell, a philosopher in the beginning of the 20th century argued that laziness is really a relic from our past: Before the industrial revolution people had to work all the time to survive. After the industrial revolution there was no economical reason for long working hours. Because, technically speaking, modern technology has finally made it possible for the whole community to practise laziness. The idea of leisure for the poor, has been always strange for the rich. Average working hours in England in the 19th. century were 15 for men, and 12 for children; it was a wide spread belief that work kept adults from drinking, and children from mischief.

**JK:** What do you live on?

**SN:** I'm the assistant director of the SCCA, Center for Contemporary Arts-Ljubljana. I'm actually paid for the work I like, modestly, but I can live on this.

**JK:** Is it possible to separate "work" artist work and private life?

**SN:** No. We are not in a profession you put down your pen and leave when it's five o'clock. Of course I try not to work all the time but I always generate ideas. What I do is, I don't open e-mails, I don't answer the mobile phone (if not just before the opening or many other occasions when one just can't afford the luxury of free weekend).

But for example this year we took a revolutionary two months off, and went on a family travel to Turkey. It was wonderful and private, but at the same time I have developed many ideas while talking with interesting people we met or knew, and they were of course from the world of art.

**JK:** It is not really a job in which you can separate private from working life.

**SN:** The circumstances for an artist are in Slovenia tougher than for example in Switzerland so we presume that the circle of artists in Ljubljana is rather small?

The scene in Slovenia is not small at all. Let me put it this way, I spent a few days in Zurich but I had the chance to talk to very different, mostly very interesting people, and through the conversations I got to know a little bit the scene in Zurich; I got the impression it is quite similar to Ljubljana, not only concerning artists, but also concerning NGOs. In Slovenia we have an abundance of NGO institutions who doing really interesting things. I'm worrying a little if it will remain so, as the fuel is mainly enthusiasm and logically this enthusiasm is slowly wearing off, because the working conditions are really precarious in Slovenia.

But I must say the art scene in all levels is incredibly diverse and rich, for such a small city. Sometimes it is even difficult to find time to see everything you want to see, which is really surprising for a city the size of Zurich, and with a very small cultural budget, but there is a lot of good energy and many interesting things happening.

**JK:** So there are different venues for visual art in Ljubljana, even when there is almost no budget?

**SN:** The only problem of Slovenia..., well not the only problem (laughing) only one of the problems in Slovenia, at least in visual art is, that there has been very little new venues in the last decades. People can't afford the rent and costs for running a space. As an individual curator or artist, you can actually get some money for a project, but it doesn't pay the rent of a venue.

Rent is very high, and private owners prefer spaces empty to lowering the rate or perhaps even thinking about using it to contribute to the (art) community.

**JK:** Why not? Does it have to do with the change of System from Yugoslavia to Slovenia?

**SN:** A lot of spaces have been nationalized in the times of Yugoslavia and then returned to families of original owners in beginning the 90ies. Newly established owners are mainly interested in generating money quickly, so we don't have situations of temporary use (and affordable rent). This I have encountered quite often in Vienna, where one for example buys a house, and while organizing its transformation in posh apartments lets off- spaces to use it.

Our space owners prefer to leave a house empty, as they simply don't understand the concept of temporarily usage. So it is almost impossible to get a space.

I used to think differently – when we didn't have a space I thought it was good because we were forced to collaborate with others, which is true; we still collaborate with others, we only don't have to go through all the organisational fuss of finding a space for each event we organised. Furthermore I think permanent space is very important for generating public in long term period, for cultivating your public..

**JK:** The venue is important to generate public you say, and to generate a good exhibition there is a good curator needed. Do you think a curator is also an artist?

**SN:** No. Of course not (laughing)

**JK:** Of course not, why of course?

**SN:** (Thinking) I do believe the curator is somebody who must work with artists and who must actually curate contexts for reading artworks. And I do believe a good curator disappears when the exhibition is shown. The curator's fingerprint shouldn't be that visible.

**JK:** So the artist should be up front not the curator?

**SN:** The Artwork! One must be very precise especially in a situation today when curators also took over art critics role in writing art history. And art history must be written with artworks! Not with artists and not with curators. But of course nowadays there are many different curators and it is really a

controversial topic and if you open any "Vademecum" on curatorial interviews you would find diverse possible curatorial roles ranging from mediator to translator, to organizer to creator. I think curatorial practise is creative, but you shouldn't interfere with artistic practice, and you should be very careful how you work with it, and how to work with artists. In that sense I advocate for a little bit less spectacular curatorial role I think.

**JK:** What is the curatorial part in the work of the artist, especially in long-term collaborations?

**SN:** It's a discursive part. You are there to actually to discuss the project, to place it in wider context, to elaborate on possible interpretations of the work, but not to co-create it.

Our role should also be giving feedback to the artist, because we are the "connaisseurs", we are the professionals, we are the ones who know, supposed to know, also art history and understand shifts in artistic, theoretical, curatorial practises, which I think is important, That's also why I showed the video in the end of my presentation "Everything has been done", a video by Polish art group Azorro, because everything has been done it is just a matter of the contexts. I am really annoyed by this omnipresent demand for new and new, because there is nothing new and statements like that just show ignorance towards the past and tendencies towards "spectacularisation".

And I do believe the artists need somebody to talk to and I also believe that curator should work in close connection with the artists. I think it is really important to follow the process of an artistic production, to be close and give feedback.

But of course one has to be careful, especially when artist are young and the curator very charismatic then the artist can get too influenced by the curator. So a curator has to be very careful and precise about his role. As today I think the role of a curator is really very important and a curator is therefore very powerful. And when you are in such a powerful position you have to reflect on what you do and how you do it constantly.

**JK:** So the curator is walking on a very thin line

**SN:** Yes!

**JK:** Who is then the author of an exhibition, the artist or the curator?

**SN:** The author is of course the curator. Actually I would prefer the word author to curator. I think we have to reform a little bit the concept of curator. But the exhibition is the (one of the) media the curator is using.

**JK:** Do you think in an exhibition something like a clear defined authorship is missing?

**SN:** When you are very precise about different positions, and its relations then authorship can be quite clear. And if you say that an author of an exhibition is a curator, but an exhibition is about artworks, which are placed in a certain contexts to be read as curator saw it; I don't see a problem in that. I don't see the role of an artist is diminished through that, as long as a curator is working with knowledge, respect and awareness of her responsibilities with the artists and with artworks.

**JK:** But it can put the curator in another position when he looks at himself as an author of the exhibition.

**SN:** The curator is the one who is actually conceptualizing the exhibition, but it has to be done in collaboration with the artist and with good knowledge of artworks.

**JK:** And if an artist like Claire Kenny curates own artwork together with artwork from other artists...?

**SN:** That I find a bit problematic, of course she is not the only one, far from that. Such practise can very often lead to an attempt to contextualize your practise in a frame you want it to be read; i.e. using other works just to provide you with a context you want.

The artist is completely differently attached to its own work than a curator. The curatorial role is supposed to be analyzing, and understanding artistic practices in a wider context. I'm almost sure that an artist can't do it, even though she can be careful and precise about different positions she operates within. As an artist you surely see your work differently than works of other artists, which is completely fine as long as you don't curate them.

So I think it's not really possible to curate your

own work, as it is too close and it is a completely different perspective. You can't detach yourself from your artwork.

### Authorship of artwork, private collections and exhibition fee for artwork

Authorship of artwork and the problems with private collections:

When an artist sells her artwork, she no longer can influence the way the artwork is shown, for example in an exhibition. But the way it is shown can contribute to changes in reading of the work. Therefore Saša Nabergoj is sceptical towards the private collections that come from financially well off institutions, when they prefer not to finance existing structures in the world of art but rather create their own collections. That seems in a way privatizing the cultural heritage. Because if an artist sells her work to the museum of modern art for example, the museum of modern art is obliged to follow certain rules from museological, art historical field and has to follow principles that contribute to general public benefit. While private collection do not answer to any public "laws," and can therefore—if I exaggerate a little—burn the whole collection down if owners decide so.

Exhibition fee for artist of visual art—worldwide:

Saša Nabergoj is a strong advocate of such an exhibition fee, as she doesn't understand the divisions between different disciplines in culture. When one invites a theatre group, one pays all the costs, if one invites a music group one negotiates a little, but everybody involved in the production is paid. When one invites visual artists or curators, they are supposed to work for free and be happy for the opportunity... She thinks one of the good practises in socialistic times in Yugoslavia was, that every author, every artist got a certain amount of money for an exhibition. It was systematically arranged and of course based on a worker salary, but everybody got an exhibition fee.. Therefore Saša Nabergoj appreciates the act of rebellion like it happened in Vienna on the Gender Check exhibition in MUMOK, organized and financed by ERSTE Foundation. It was a huge research and exhibition about a gender issue in the works of art from the countries from ex-Eastern Block, and ex Soviet Union, with a lot of accompanying program and a comprehensive catalogue. And they didn't pay any artist's fee. One Slovenian artist demanded a fee for his work to be exhibited, was denied and then rejected to participate the exhibition. A very brave act especially for an

independent artist in relation to big power culture structures, but Saša Nabergoj supported this artist.

Exhibition fee a subject at the WORLD OF ART, School for curators and critics of contemporary art:

Saša Nabergoj explains that they are paying a fee to every artist who is collaborating with the school, but what is also important, exhibition fees are presented and argued as case of good practise to the World of Art students, future curators and critics that will be running the world of art of tomorrow. They established and follow a practice that should be normal. She thinks the Suisse and Slovenian phenomenon when most of small NGO are paying fees for artists, while big public institutions (on much bigger budget) are not, is very problematic.

Saša Nabergoj believes that the system can change if many individuals (in and out institutions) would think and act the same way as the WORLD OF ART.

### **Saša (Glavan) Nabergoj (1971)**

Art historian, curator and critic. Assistant director at SCCA–Ljubljana, Center for Contemporary Arts (Slovenia). A member of AICA (International Association of Art Critics) and IKT (International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam). Writer, editor, curator and lecturer on contemporary art, focusing on curatorial and critical practices.

She curated many exhibition, among them *Line Stroke the Letter (Matchpoint Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 5. 9.–13. 10. 2013)*; with Barbara Borcic, Dušan Dovc, Ida Hiršenfelder, *Studio 6 Presents: Liminale (Project Room SCCA, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 20. 6.–22. 7. 2013, exhibition was part of 7th Triennial of Contemporary Art in Slovenia)*; with Simona Žvanut, *That's Doodles (City Gallery Nova Gorica, Slovenia, 15. 3.–5. 4. 2013)*, *Doodles (Simulaker Gallery, Novo mesto, Slovenia, 26. 10.–21. 11. 2012)*, *Studio 6 Presents: CAC Bukovje (SLO) and Studio Golo Brdo (CRO) (Matchpoint Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia, November 2011)*, *Tomislav Brajnovic: Ekspedition\_ego (Alkatraz Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia, November 2010)*; both with Sonja Zavrtnik, *Around the world of art in 4.380 days. World of Art 1997–2009 (Alkatraz Gallery, November 2009)*, *Ola Pehrson. Retrospective. Ljubljana. Beograd. Stockholm (Škuc Gallery, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 19. 12. 2007–20. 1. 2008)*; *Salon of Museum of Contemporary Art Beograd, Serbia, February, March 2008* and *Färgfabriken, Sweden, October 2009*; with Joa Ljungberg. She has lectured extensively, recently: *Legends and Stories of the Parallel Reality on symposia Archive as a Strategy: Conversations on self-historisation on the*

*Case of East Art Map organised by Calvert 22 and University College of London (May 2012), Curatorial Intervention on a conference Applied Exhibiting, ECM, Post-graduate educating, curating and managing studies at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna (May 2012) and A Praise of Lazyness atTEDx in Maribor, Slovenia (January 2011).*

She edited several publications, recently: *Open Systems, Quaterly for Contemporary Art and Theory (August 2013)*, *Anthology Dilemmas of Curatorial Practices (2012)*; with Barbara Borcic.

Since November 2011, she is working on a research of visual art scene at Autonomous Cultural Center (ACC) Metelkova City (Ljubljana, Slovenia) in collaboration with Alkatraz Gallery and Simona Žvanut. Within this working process they prepared exhibition and research projects: *The Closing Stop, various locations in ACC Metelkova City, 10. 9.–9. 10. 2013 (co-curated Metelkova Revived!, documentary exhibition at the 20th Anniversary of ACC Metelkova City, Alkatraz Gallery, Slovenia, 10. 9.–9. 10. 2013)*; with Ana Grobler, Sebastian Krawczyk, Jadranka Plut, Simona Žvanut) and *A Mid-Stop, various locations in ACC Metelkova, 6.–25. 9. 2012 (co-curated M'Art, Alkatraz Gallery, Slovenia, 6.–24. 9.)*; with Jadranka Plut).

Since February 2013 she is a guest lecturer on the Department of Art History (Faculty of Arts, Ljubljana) at Seminar for Modern Art I (Assist. Prof. Rebeka Vidrih).

At SCCA–Ljubljana she is a head of World of Art, School for Curators and Critics of Contemporary Art (since 1998) and Studio 6 (since 2004). Currently she is preparing the third Port Izmir (Turkey), triennial of contemporary art (November 2013–June 2014).

**Jill Keiser** is a journalist, a producer and curator, currently working at the Swiss radio and television. She graduated as a Master of Advanced Studies in Curating and also opened up a space for Audio work XLR in Zürich.