

# ARTLEAKS

# GAZETTE

# 3



ART WORKERS  
OF THE WORLD  
UNITE!

UNPLUG MACHINE!  
OF WASHING  
OLIGARCHS!

ART  
WORKERS  
PRIDE!

UNIONIZE!

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# **ArtLeaks Gazette 3 Artists Against Precarity and Violence – Resistance Strategies, Unionizing, and Coalition Building in a Time of Global Conflict and Contradiction**

## **Introduction**

The ArtLeaks Gazette aims to shed critical light on both the challenges and obstacles inherent in the contemporary art world, in order to work towards constructive and meaningful transformations. Beyond “breaking the silence” and exposing bad practices, ArtLeaks is exploring the ways in which art workers around the world are pushing towards changing their factories of art, embedded in larger socio-economic-political flows. We realize this is a difficult task as the global condition since ArtLeaks was established in 2011 is quite different now. The (art)world has changed due to the major political and economic changes, while violence and hostility have greatly increased around the globe. The years to come seem like they will be even more full of conflicts and contradictions. Due to the increase of global wars, the threat of climate breakdown, and other devastating realities, technological progress cannot reduce or eradicate capitalist exploitation. Therefore, new media and technology are being used in a negative way, encouraging deeper precarity, austerity, and inequality. This is also happening in the sector of arts and culture increasing the debt of artists and cultural workers. We hope that art workers are able to formulate an answer to these challenges, to build strong coalitions, and to unionize in order to counter precarity and violence in a countervailing way.

The third issue of the ArtLeaks Gazette: “Artists Against Precarity and Violence – Resistance Strategies, Unionizing, and Coalition Building in a Time of Global Conflict and Contradiction”, brings together art workers dealing with these urgent

questions about models of organizations, unionizing, and strategies of resistance, and helping us to illuminate new ways of production and coalition building in international and local environments.

Specifically, left over of cultural institutions of the welfare state is in poor shape due to the neoliberal offensive now underway for several decades. For example, in so-called “creative” European cities, significant numbers of registered artists function as a “reserve army” for cheap or even voluntary work. Conditions of artistic labor are summarily dismissed as unimportant, frequently among the upper echelons of the art management class, and sometimes even among artists that have either achieved economic hegemony or aspire to it. In some cases, when members of the art community do decide to speak out, they face the danger of being excluded from an exhibition or a project, or blacklisted from working in certain institutions. One of the problems lies in the fact that artists usually do not understand themselves as workers, but are interpolated as subjects of neoliberal necessity, working against each other and claim that art production differs from the production relations in a capitalist economy.

Several present-day art worker groups are beginning to look back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, and even further to the mid 19th century, particularly in the 1930s, as moments of inspiration during social movements and political struggles, for the struggle for art workers’ rights, reclaiming cultural institutions, art and/as labor in a global context. Indeed, we would emphasize today’s art workers need more of that do-it-together spirit, a greater common interest and a more developed strategy and plan for transformation. The challenge remains to continue to question the autonomy of artistic production, to confront those who benefit with this mode of cultural profiteering, and to demythologize the production process of art itself.

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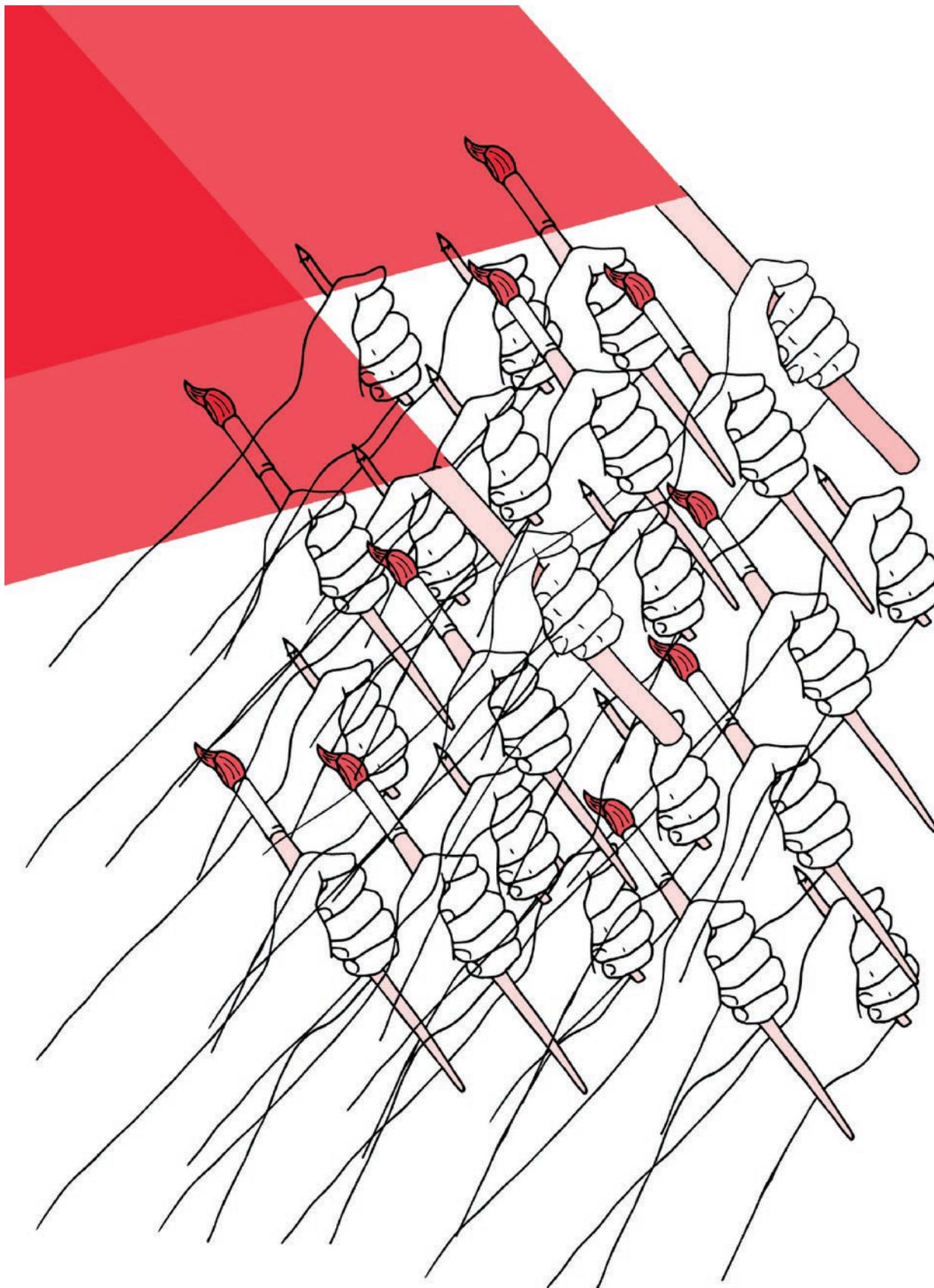
**Corina L. Apostol, Ingela Johansson, Bojana Piškur, Dmitry Vilensky, Mikołaj Iwański and Joanna Figiel, Xandra Popescu with Veda Popovici, Delia Popa and Ioana Cojocar, Alejandro Strus and Sonja Hornung, Haben und Brauchen, G.U.L.F., Ivor Stodolsky**

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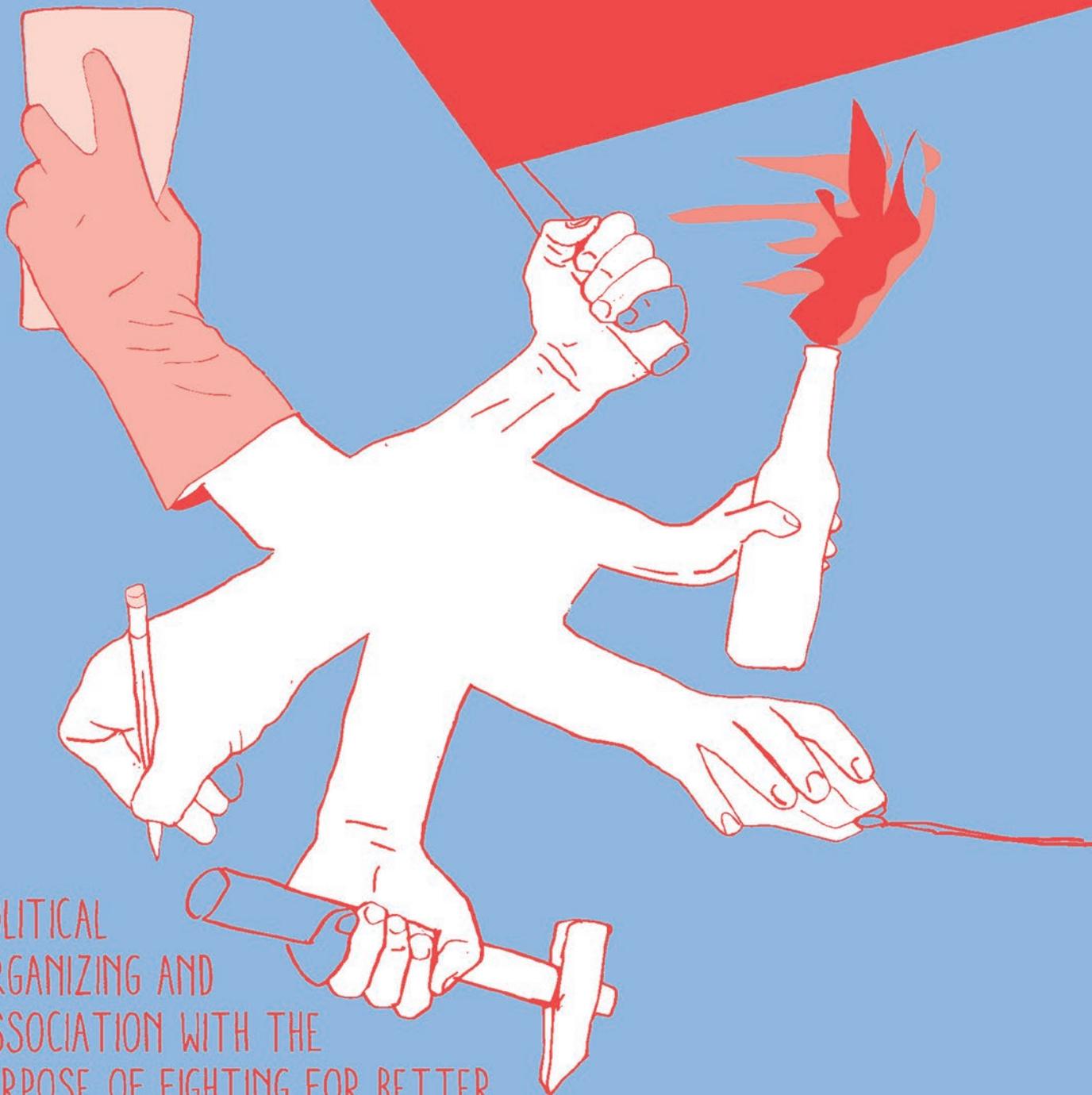
**KURS, Anastasia Vepreva and Roman Osminkin, Tatiana Fiodorova, Monotremu**

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Published by **ArtLeaks**, August 2015, <http://art-leaks.org/>



KURS, drawing for wall newspaper, 2014/15.



POLITICAL  
ORGANIZING AND  
ASSOCIATION WITH THE  
PURPOSE OF FIGHTING FOR BETTER  
LABOR, MATERIAL AND LIFE CONDITIONS  
CONCERNS ALL PEOPLE.

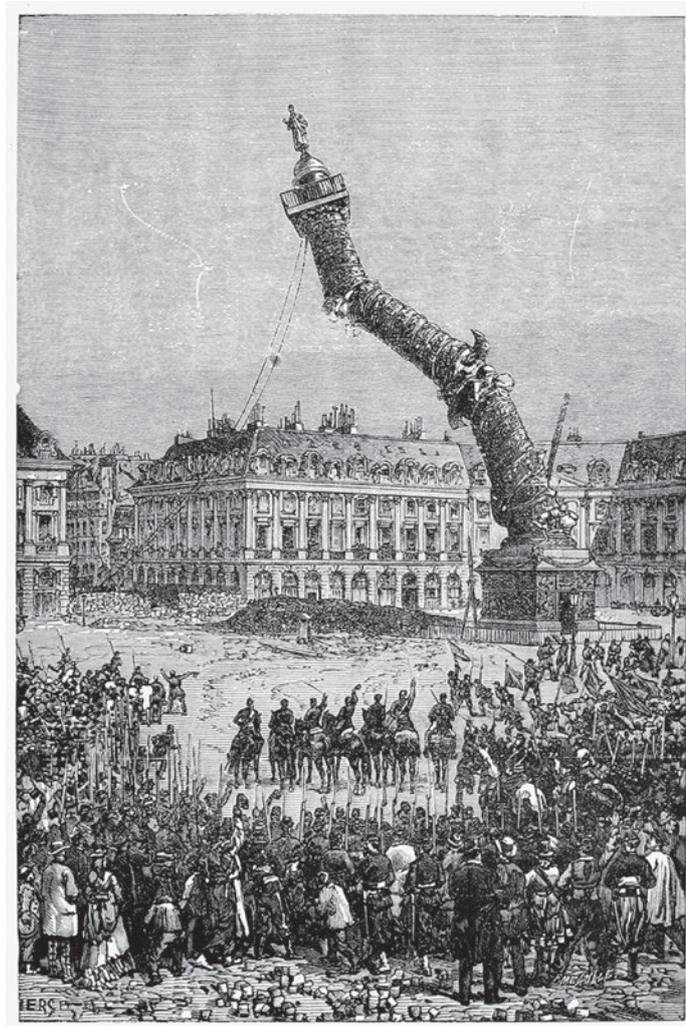
# Art Workers Between Precarity and Resistance: A Genealogy

**Corina L. Apostol**

## **On present-day and historical stakes**

In the backstage of art fairs, biennales, shows, before artworks are exhibited, sold, collected or gifted, artists, interns, assistants, handlers, curators research and plan, they acquire working materials, necessary tools, to draw, to write, to build, to rehearse, or to film, to publicize and invite audiences on social media. Performances, graphics, installations, films, sculptures, documents or paintings, are all the result of artistic labor and of creativity. Despite this reality, on today's global art market, artistic labor goes unrecognized while the focus falls solely on the tangible results of this labor. As a result, conditions of artistic labor are summarily dismissed as unimportant, frequently among the upper echelons of the art management, and sometimes even among artists. In some cases, when members of the art community do decide to speak out, they face the danger of being excluded from an exhibition or a project, or blacklisted from working in certain institutions.

This critical state of affairs is not a *sine qua non*. The widespread belief that artists are far too independent and focused on their own work to self-organize and participate in social movements is easily contradicted by a substantial amount of historical examples when artists came to work together in unions, communes, associations, guilds, syndicates or collectives. Many of these started in the mid-19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. What is also important is that these artists were not just seeking better pay, legal rights, and life securities, but also aligned themselves with workers' movements that challenged the dominant status quo. Since the second half of the 19th century, when the terms artist, art worker and activist



Unknown artist, the Destruction of the Vendôme erected by Napoleon to commemorate his victory at Austerlitz, lithograph, 1871, Credit: Getty Images

were used interchangeably in the context of the Artists Union inside the Paris Commune, artists have occupied a precarious and consciously in-between position within the class stratification of society. This lineage of self-reflection and resistance can be traced through international avant-garde movements that followed. Within these groups, which I discuss later in this text, artists and art theorists opposed the notion of “art for art’s sake” and attempted to embrace a working class identity even though they widely disagreed about what exactly this entailed. In this sense, we can conceptualize the historical development of engaged art workers as a dialectical relationship between artists and society, wherein the transformation of one cannot occur independently of the other. As I show through my selection of the following case-study examples, collective actions at the macro-level and the grassroots-level could not exist separated from one another.

### **The artist as art worker and activist: nineteenth century beginnings**

In the second half of the 19th century reactionary appeals to an art for art's sake clashed with principles of an emerging avant-gardism. During the revolutionary period in France, artist Gustave Courbet penned the famous Realist Manifesto (1855),<sup>1</sup> immediately after Marx's famous Communist Manifesto (1848). While the extent to which he participated in major historical events has been put into question, Courbet's bold confidence and passionate belief in the artist's role in changing society – broadly conceived – towards a liberated and socialist future were strongly shaped by these events. Those were turbulent times of class and political conflicts, from the moment the working class entered the scene as an autonomous political force – which was brutally suppressed by the bourgeoisie – to the French workers' brief, yet powerful Commune.

In 1871 Courbet called on Parisian artists to “assume control of the museums and art collections which, though the property of the nation, are primarily theirs, from the intellectual as well as the material point of view.”<sup>2</sup> Courbet's statement responded to the paradigm shift of the economic framework, wherein the transfer of capital accumulated by capitalist organizations created a new class. This bourgeoisie had acquired economic means and invested heavily in the salon art production to flaunt their power. Emerging as new spaces for the presentation and enjoyment of art by the bourgeoisie, the salons of the 19th century operated autonomously from the church and the monarchy; while self-fashioned as disengaged from everyday production, they at the same time built themselves as powerful, independent entities in the field of art. Courbet challenged the salon system and the political classes it upheld through his infamous monumental canvases depicting labor, sex workers and peasants, through his support for the communards' removal of the imperialistic Vendôme Column in 1871, and his role as commissar of culture in the Commune committee.

The transformation of the artist's subjectivity as art worker and activist during the latter half of the 19th century, spearheaded by the Realist movement, was an initial landmark moment that continues to define the relationship between art and social movements today. Courbet's appeal was one of the first instances when artists' aspiration for social change led them to align themselves with a wider workers' movement and break with the bourgeois institutions of art and the monarchy. Transgressing from artistic praxis into political action, artists could be considered as a counter-power, occupying political functions in a new order, no matter how briefly this lasted.

**Art workers, avant-gardes and new social movements**

In the following case studies, I show how artist groups from around the world sought affinities and alliances to various degrees with members of the organized Left, in order to frame the concept of “art worker” as a form of recurring artistic subjectivity under which members of the artistic community mobilized in different context and using different strategies, from artistic interventions to direct actions. Thus my analysis of these groups does not rely on historical causality from one cycle of protest or one movement to another, rather it builds a ground for a comparative study of both continuity and change, overlap and dissonance.

While its participants did not express a specifically socialist position, the DADA movement opposed the values of bourgeois society, political conservatism and the senseless First World War. DADA inaugurated a specific, rebellious attitude towards artistic production, and expressed a set of discontents with the institutionalized nature of the art world. Some members of Berlin DADA sought to identify, at least in theory with the working class, presenting themselves not as artists in service of capital, but rather artists of the working class: art workers.<sup>3</sup> As Helen Molesworth has observed, “Dada’s perpetual return is due to the constant need to articulate the ever changing problems of capitalism and the role of the laborer within it.”<sup>4</sup> Unlike their 19th century predecessors, DADA was mainly a cultural



Front page of the Allgemeine Illustrierte Zeitung (AIZ) with a photomontage by John Heartfield, The Meaning of the Hitler Salute: Little man asks for big gifts. Motto: Millions Stand Behind Me!), 1932, Credit: Metropolitan Museum, Timeline of Art History.



Tina Modotti, Syndicate of Painters, Sculptors and Technical Workers on May Day in Mexico City, 1929, Credit: Getty Images

movement spearheaded by artists who had been displaced and disillusioned by WW1, and who used various forms of creative expression to express their anti-war position. Due to this, there was an affinity between the various DADA movements and the Left political parties, especially in Berlin, although, rather than expressing a socialist position, DADA remained heterogeneous and anarchic. DADA's importance is that the movement sparked an awareness that an artist's role in society could no longer be considered according to the antiquated and deeply problematic nature of high bourgeois society.

Just a decade later, in Mexico City the groundbreaking Syndicate of Technical Workers, painters and sculptors demonstrated alongside the local proletarian social movement with creative enthusiasm. Even though Mexico had hard won its independence in 1821 from the Spanish Empire, the economic divide between the rich and the poor, and the social gap between the Spanish and Amerindian decedents were glaring, sparking a decade of civil wars in the country. In their 1922 Manifesto, the Syndicate grasped the general socialist zeitgeist and addressed to "the workers, peasants oppressed by the rich, to the soldiers transformed into hangmen by their chiefs and to the intellectuals who are not servile to the bourgeoisie." They wrote: "we are with those who seek to overthrow an old and inhuman system, without which you, worker of the soil, produce riches for the overseer and politician, while you starve. We proclaim that this is the moment of social transformation from a decrepit to a new order." Their goal was "to create a beauty for all, which enlightens and stirs to struggle."<sup>5</sup> Many members of the Syndicate, which functioned as a guild, joined the Mexican Communist Party (MCP). Their activities

were invested both in a new type of collective artistic language, which found its expression in the large-scale educational public murals sponsored by the state, and defending artists rights and interests.<sup>6</sup> However, over the course of the decade, the Syndicate members grew increasingly dissatisfied with the government and began criticizing the post-revolutionary realities in Mexico. The government terminated the muralists' contracts, expelled them from the Party and the Syndicate gradually dissolved as some of its founders such as David Alfaro Siqueiros emigrated.

In the same timeframe, this time in New York, The Harlem Artists Guild was founded in 1928. Its first president, the artist Aaron Douglas,<sup>7</sup> together with vice-president Augusta Savage and prominent members of the Harlem Renaissance movement (Gwendolyn Bennett, Norman Lewis, Charles Alston and others) agitated for the end of race-based discrimination and for the inclusion and fair pay of African American artists in arts organizations. Although an Artists' Union existed in New York at the time, these artists felt the necessity for an organization based on the needs of the Harlem artists' community, that would more effectively represent and lobby for their views and values. The guild's constitution stated that, "being aware of the need to act collectively in the solution of the cultural, economic and professional problems that confront us" their goals were first to encourage young talent to "foster understanding between artist and public [through] education" and through "cooperation with agencies and individuals interested in the improvement of conditions among artists," and finally to raise "standards of living and achievement among artists."<sup>8</sup> The guild played an influential role in helping artists attain the recognition necessary to qualify them for the WPA (Works Progress Administration) work projects.<sup>9</sup> With the assistance of the Harlem Artist Guild, and the WPA, African American artists succeeded in gaining employment despite the hard times of the 1930s.



Unknown Photographer, Artists Union Picket, 1930s

### Re-adaptations and new cycles of struggle after the second world war

In the post-WW2 reactionary period in the United States, The Artists' Equity Association was established at a time when unions were dismantled, factories purged of women, and the government's hostility towards artists left them with very little prospects. The Association<sup>10</sup> faced considerable opposition as the idea of organized artists was looked on with suspicion by conservative critics and lawmakers due to a lingering antipathy to the activism of previous groups as the Artists' Union and the Harlem Artists' Guild and because of the ideological Cold War mistrust of socialist values. The Association ended up duplicating some of the activities that concerned its aforementioned predecessors putting in place its own grievance committee.

It functioned as a collective working platform, which agitated for improved economic conditions for visual artists, and for the expansion and protection of artists' rights. Even though it did not endure for more than a decade the Association was a national endeavor, bringing together artist leaders, museum directors and critics to discuss issues around the visibility of the artists and their financial conditions.<sup>11</sup>

In the turbulent 1960s and 1970s artists were once more among the first to self-organize, identifying with the workforce under pressure to accept pay cuts, pension cuts and to disband unions. In 1968 France, artists, workers and students, pent up with anger over general poverty, unemployment, the conservative government, and military involvement in Southeast Asia, took to the streets in waves of strikes and demonstrations. Factories and universities were occupied.



L'Atelier Populaire, The police post themselves at the School of Fine Arts [while] the Fine Arts' students poster the streets, 1968.

Atelier Populaire (the Popular Workshop), an arts organization founded by students and faculty on strike at the École des Beaux Arts in the capital, produced street posters and banners for the revolt that would, “Give concrete support to the great movement of the workers on strike who are occupying their factories in defiance of the Gaullist government.” The visual material was designed and printed anonymously and distributed freely, held up on barricades, carried in demonstrations, and plastered on walls all over France. The Atelier intended this material not be taken as, “the final outcome of an experience, but as an inducement for finding, through contact with the masses, new levels of action, both on the cultural and the political plane.”<sup>12</sup> Unlike its predecessors from the Realist movement, Atelier Populaire did not seek to become a political party or power, but functioned as a critical cultural frame around the social movement in France at the time.

In 1969, in the same turbulent socio-political global climate, an international group of artists and critics formed the Art Workers’ Coalition in New York. Hundreds of art workers participated in the AWC’s open meetings. Its function was similar to that of a trade union, engaging directly with museum boards and administrators who had become the façade of the commercial art world. The group which began around demonstrations at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, presented museums with a list of demands. The group invoked its avant-garde processors in posters, flyers and banners, referring for example to the felling of the Vendôme Column in Paris by the communards in 1878 as an inspiration. They also sought inspiration in the Artists Unions of the 1930s that organized themselves similarly to industrial unions, as well as artist’s guilds in Holland and Denmark, demanding subsidies for universal employment, rather than support from private capital from wealthy patrons.<sup>13</sup> In their famous list of demands, the AWC called for the introduction of a royalties system by which collectors had to pay artists a percentage



Art Workers Coalition, 1970, Photo credit: Jan van Raay

of their profits from resale, the creation of a trust fund for living artists, and the demand that all museums should be open for free at all times, and that their opening hours should accommodate the working classes. They also demanded that art institutions make exhibition space available for women, minorities and artists with no gallery representing them. In 1970 the AWC formed an alliance with MoMA's Staff Association and by working simultaneously from both inside and outside institutional boundaries, their coalition of art-activists and the staff members were able to establish PASTA (The Professional and Administrative Staff Association) in 1970. This was one of the most significant official unions of art workers in the United States, as it joined together the interest of artist with those in similarly precarious conditions who are involved in different aspects of artistic production.<sup>14</sup> Although the Art Workers Coalition folded after three years of intense activities, their legacy of reimagining artistic labor and challenging the unjust and discriminatory institutional models in the United States endured. More recently, with the involvement of the artistic community in social movements such as Occupy, questions of artistic subjectivity and class composition, artists as workers, protest politics and the role of art and artistic institution in the age of the art market have become once again paramount.

### **Contemporary challenges and new beginnings**

Today, it has become clear that artists are pressured to conform to the logic of the art market, even becoming the symbols of the new neoliberal creative economy. As cultural critics such as Gregory Sholette<sup>15</sup> have correctly observed, by coopting the desires and demands of the 1960s and 1970s cultures of protest, businesses and policy makers have transformed the office into more flexible, less hierarchical forms of control, that are increasingly difficult to disentangle and oppose.

At the same time, some artists groups who lead a precarious existence continue to identify as workers, at a time when traditional industries have all but disappeared, when there is no longer the safety net of the extinct welfare states, or as some countries at the periphery of the European Union, where the state has altogether ceased to mediate between the working population and the corporate empire. While the 1% enjoy their prosperity, it is by now abundantly clear that the many have not taken advantage of the trickle-down effect.

In the art world, even blue-chip artists deal with constantly changing occupations, traveling from one art fair to another biennale to another major exhibition, with exhausting networking and publicizing. While even the successful artists struggle, there are also those many artists whose production is invisible, yet completely necessary for the art world to go on spinning. Those young art students, newly graduated from academies and universities, have to deal with not being able to afford a studio, with scrambling for teaching positions, with having almost no health benefits. For the most part these artists end up as manual producers, whose

skills such as painting, welding, casting, designing, are employed by the knowledge producers. This labor hierarchy illustrates the widening divide between the very few artists who are successful and the many that are not privy to the wealth of today's art world. The latter, like other precarious workers continue to struggle to get to the right side of (art)history, to escape their condition of have-nots. In such difficult times, collective political organizing has become once again necessary. On the backdrop of social movements who are tackling the side-effects of the so-called financial crises around the world, the destruction of educational and cultural structures together with the rise of the right wing and nationalist sentiments, some art workers' groups also began engaging with the artistic equivalent of the military-industrial-complex.

Currently there exist international self-organized coalitions, collectives, brigades, forums, assemblies, a loosely united, international art workers front working to disentangle the problematics around the tightening mesh of power and capital gripping art and cultural institutions. These groups are tackling issues around precarious conditions, the corporatization of the art world, the privatization of public spaces, self/exploitation, abuse, corruption, and so on, that affect not only the artists in the exhibition spaces, but also those anonymous many who invisibly labor to keep the art world working, those who clean exhibition spaces, guard galleries, those to build art fairs, underpaid or unpaid interns. These initiatives have managed to demonstrate that art workers are not bound to atomized, agent-less subjectivities, and that there is still a genuine desire for significant change in the art world.

In the United States, the New York based group Occupy Museums was born out of the Occupy Movement in 2011, criticizing through direct actions inside museums the connections between the corrupt high finance establishment and a corrupt and tamed high culture. Occupy Museums targeted important private museums in Europe and the United States, and attempt to hold them accountable to the public via means of horizontal spaces for debate and collaboration. Also coming from New York, the group W.A.G.E. is dedicated to drawing attention to economic inequalities that are prevalent in the art world, developing a system of institutional certification that allows art workers to survive within the greater economy. In London, the group Liberate Tate have engaged in a continuous wave of creative disobedience against Tate Modern, urging them to renounce funding from toxic oil companies. In the same city, the groups Precarious Workers' Brigade and Ragpickers have come out in solidarity with those struggling to survive in the so-called climate of economic crisis and enforced austerity measures, developing social and political tools to combat precarity in art and society. In Russia, the May Congress of Creative Workers, established in 2010 in Moscow, has acted as an organizational frame feeling the need to research the motivations, urgencies, approaches and strategies of cultural workers for survival, in the context of the tenuous production conditions in Russia and Ukraine – characterized by different levels of oppression, abuses of authority and even physical violations.

## wo/manifesto

**W.A.G.E. (WORKING ARTISTS AND THE GREATER ECONOMY) WORKS TO DRAW ATTENTION TO ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES THAT EXIST IN THE ARTS, AND TO RESOLVE THEM.**

**W.A.G.E. HAS BEEN FORMED BECAUSE WE, AS VISUAL + PERFORMANCE ARTISTS AND INDEPENDENT CURATORS, PROVIDE A WORK FORCE.**

**W.A.G.E. RECOGNIZES THE ORGANIZED IRRESPONSIBILITY OF THE ART MARKET AND ITS SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS, AND DEMANDS AN END OF THE REFUSAL TO PAY FEES FOR THE WORK WE'RE ASKED TO PROVIDE: PREPARATION, INSTALLATION, PRESENTATION, CONSULTATION, EXHIBITION AND REPRODUCTION.**

**W.A.G.E. REFUTES THE POSITIONING OF THE ARTIST AS A SPECULATOR AND CALLS FOR THE REMUNERATION OF CULTURAL VALUE IN CAPITAL VALUE.**

**W.A.G.E. BELIEVES THAT THE PROMISE OF EXPOSURE IS A LIABILITY IN A SYSTEM THAT DENIES THE VALUE OF OUR LABOR.**

**AS AN UNPAID LABOR FORCE WITHIN A ROBUST ART MARKET FROM WHICH OTHERS PROFIT GREATLY, W.A.G.E. RECOGNIZES AN INHERENT EXPLOITATION AND DEMANDS COMPENSATION.**

**W.A.G.E. CALLS FOR AN ADDRESS OF THE ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES THAT ARE PREVALENT, AND PROACTIVELY PREVENTING THE ART WORKER'S ABILITY TO SURVIVE WITHIN THE GREATER ECONOMY.**

**W.A.G.E. ADVOCATES FOR DEVELOPING AN ENVIRONMENT OF MUTUAL RESPECT BETWEEN ARTIST AND INSTITUTION.**

**W.A.G.E. DEMANDS PAYMENT FOR MAKING THE WORLD MORE INTERESTING.**

W.A.G.E., wo/manifesto, 2008, Image credit: W.A.G.E.

Between 2010 and 2013, the Congress functioned as a tool of exercising the power to formulate grievances about particular working conditions and working towards establishing structures and alliances to improve them. More recently in February 2014, during the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, a group of artists and activists decided to occupy the Ministry of Culture in Kiev and launched the Assembly for Culture in Ukraine, demanding ideological, structural and financial restructuring of this important organizational body. While not all its members self-identified as art workers, the assembly continues to work in the same building as an ongoing meeting of citizens who are concerned with how cultural processes in Ukraine are structured and intent on transforming these structures and pressing the Ministry of Culture to shift the vector of influence on culture from government ideology to the masses who are the recipients and creators of cultural products and processes.

When ArtLeaks,<sup>16</sup> the organization I co-founded in 2011 was launched, it was in the larger context of social movements and establishment of several of the aforementioned activist initiatives. Unlike many activist groups, which function under an anonymous, collective identity, it was important to us to use our real names and

make concrete demands, to take responsibility and not make it leaderless project, which could provoke suspicions. The platform has maintained an international scope, while its goal has been to unite not just artists, but also curators, critics, philosophers around issues, problems and concerns in different contexts and using diverse strategies from “leaking” to self-education, unionizing, and direct actions. Similar to our online case archive, Bojana Piškur, of the Radical Education Collective<sup>17</sup> in Ljubljana, together with Djordje Balmazović, a member of the Škart Collective, Belgrade, have put together a research investigation, “Cultural Workers’ Inquiry,”<sup>18</sup> based on Marx’s Workers’ Inquiry and concerning the position of a handful of cultural workers in Serbia in 2013. The publication, which is freely accessible online, contains straightforward testimonies of censorship, corruption and discrimination given by the respondents.

Activist groups engaged in similar struggles and activities with ArtLeaks, such as the above-mentioned Precarious Workers’ Brigade,<sup>19</sup> Occupy Museums,<sup>20</sup> Liberate Tate,<sup>21</sup> and the May Congress of Creative Workers,<sup>22</sup> have maintained fluid membership and loose hierarchical structures, making a difference without institutional support or funding. It doesn’t follow that these groups don’t have any resources – if thinking of resources not just as capital, but also as key people, experience, activist know-how, organizational knowledge, etc. They are reacting against the limits of institutions and the need to re-think them, re-write their missions, fight against proliferating repression and tacit abuse – the cultural side-effects of neoliberalism. These networks do not necessarily imply a consensus over the self-identification



First Occupy Museums action at MoMA, 2011 (Noah Fischer in coin mask), photo: Jerry Saltz



Precarious Workers' Brigades, London Precarious Workers Brigade targets the irresponsible defunding of public services, 2011

of art workers as part of the same class with common grievances and a common agenda, rather they are grounds for alliances between cultural workers and cultural communities across national borders. Through these alliances, art workers can and do support each other during the creative process and their professional endeavors, which oftentimes unfold in highly unsound or in some context, even dangerous circumstances. The art workers models of organization which I have been discussing here are not the only means by which to precipitate socio-political transformation. Rather, its importance in my opinion is that it embodies the idea of a collective, self-organized, politically concerned project that can lead to the transformation of a society. The concept of “Art worker” is a moniker that helps us recognize the possibility of such a transformation in a historically conscious way.

### **The future of art workers' movements**

One of the biggest challenges these groups face is a yet-to-be-defined overall strategic vision and the precarious ways in which their activities exist, a condition that is also visible in the current fragmentation of socially engaged, politically committed, activist practices. Categories such as activist art, interventionism, social practice, institutional critique, relational aesthetics, etc., are not cohesive in their tactics or demands, neither are they explicitly affiliated with a broader social movement from which to formulate strategies of social transformation. Arguably, this is in itself symptomatic of the effects neoliberal ideology: heightened individualism, entrepreneurship, privatization, a do-it-yourself attitude. As a counter-example, early

20th century avant-garde movements found a common ground with the organized, revolutionary Left, while the post war, neo-avant-garde was brought together by the oppositional strategies of the New Left.

And yet, some of activist art worker groups are beginning to look back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, and even further to the mid 19th century, as moments of inspiration for the fight for art workers rights, reclaiming cultural institutions, art and/as labor in a global context. Indeed, today's art workers need more of that do-it-together spirit, a greater common interest and a more developed strategy and plan for transformation. Although the genealogy of engaged art, avant-garde movements and institutional critique has been historicized, it still holds relevance and inspiration for many activists, for whom the museum, the exhibition space, are still battlegrounds for struggle and conflict, which they do not escape from but engage with, challenge, transform into spaces for the common. Undoubtedly, by remembering and relearning from past endeavors, be they successful or not, current generations of art workers, in the broadest sense of the term, can better imagine their own collective evolution and emancipation.

*Corina L. Apostol is a Ph.D candidate in the Art History Department at Rutgers University, NJ, USA. Her dissertation "Dissident Education: Socially Engaged Art from Eastern Europe in Global Context (1980-2014)" demonstrates how artists groups and creative collectives both effected and responded to global socio-political changes, through pedagogical projects that empowered audiences. She is the co-founder of the international platform ArtLeaks that exposes cases of censorship, exploitation and abuse in the artistic workforce. She is also the co-editor of the ArtLeaks Gazette, a yearly publication dedicated to art workers' rights and struggles around the world.*

#### Endnotes

- 1 Gustave Courbet, Realism, Preface to the brochure "Exhibition and sale of forty paintings and four drawings by Gustave Courbet," 1855, republished in T.J. Clarke, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848-1851*, (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society), 1973.
- 2 Courbet, Gustave. "Letter to artists of Paris, 7 April 1871". In *Letters of Gustave Courbet*, ed. Petraten-Doessachte. Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- 3 See Brigid Doherty, "The Work of Art and the Problem of Politics in Berlin Dada." *October* 105, Summer, 2003, pg. 73-92
- 4 Helen Molesworth, "From Dada to Neo-Dada and Back Again." *October* 105, Summer, 2003, pg. 180.
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ART WORKERS  
OF THE  
WORLD  
UNITE!

# **An Introduction to the Great Miners' Strike in Kiruna, Malmberget and Svappavaara - An Artistic Inquiry into The Great Miners' Strike and Solidarity Actions**

**Ingela Johansson**

On December 9, 1969, the great miners' strike erupted in the ore fields of Norrbotten in the far north of Sweden. It was a wildcat strike in which 4800 miners at LKAB's (Loussavaara-Kiirunavaara AB) mines in Svappavaara, Kiruna and Malmberget, halted work for 57 days. The reasons for the strike were many: the miners were subject to a harsh time-study system, UMS (Universal Maintenance Standards), that LKAB used to push down piece rates. Real wages had fallen steadily for fifteen years and the workers now demanded fixed wages. The company structure of LKAB was strictly hierarchical. In the context of the strike, this was illustrated by the 31 "leadership tenets." For instance, tenet 29 declared that an employee should simply follow orders, "A manager should practice his leadership in such a way that a non-manager merely needs to follow orders." By giving their managers this leadership training, LKAB implemented a new mode of work organization in the hopes that the assembly line (Fordism) would rationalize production. LKAB became state-owned in 1957, but despite this the work environment had noticeably deteriorated due to harsh rationalization measures. The miners' cabins, which contained locker rooms and communal dining rooms in which the miners socialized during breaks, were eliminated. "We are not machines." was one of many slogans in circulation on placards in Kiruna during the strike.



Photo: Satura. Documentation by Margareta Vinterheden and Alf Israelsson.

Industrial workers had achieved a higher standard of living due to the general increase in societal welfare in the postwar years. The Swedish *folkhemmet* (people's home), the vision of the welfare state, was known across the world, especially for its egalitarian ideals. Thus it was assumed internationally that workers at Sweden's largest state-owned company labored under the best conditions in the world. In reality, miners were subject to a very dangerous work environment that included noxious diesel fumes in the mines, and their wage growth was inferior to that of many other industrial workers.

The miners' strike also challenged the "spirit of unity" – the idea of state and industry working together to create harmony on the labor market. State-owned LKAB was a member of SAF (Swedish Employers Association). One demand made by the miners was that LKAB immediately withdraw from the organization. The strike also protested the miners' own trade union. The workers wanted the right to negotiate locally, rather than through Grängesberg, in central Sweden, where the offices of the miners' union were located. The largest trade union in Norbotten, Gruvtolvan, was not represented on the board of the miners' union. In general, the workers considered the union too weak to effectively put pressure on the large mining compa-

nies. Thus the strike was a strike against several parties: LKAB, the state and the miners' own collective, and L.O. (The Swedish Trade Union Confederation). The strike would shake up the social democratic welfare state and a few years afterward, in the 1970s, and L.O. began internal reforms. The most concrete change to come out of the struggle and the wildcat strikes was the Law on Codetermination in the Workplace (MBL in Swedish), which passed in 1976. The push to increase productivity, along with the introduction of Fordism at industrial plants around Europe, was challenged by industrial workers who refused to work in response to rationalizations, deteriorating pay conditions and alienation.

In northern Italy, "the two red years," ran from 1968 through 1969. A wave of strikes around Sweden, starting with the port workers' strike in Gothenburg in November 1969, gave the miners' strike added momentum. The year 1968 also witnessed a general uprising against authority. Young people challenged the norms and power structures in society at large, as well as those of a social democracy they felt was outdated. The new left wanted to see a more engaged social democracy, one that took cues from global political movements.

The miners' strike received broad popular support. Many political groups visited the ore fields during the strike: sociologists, journalists, activists and cultural workers.



"We are no machines", Photo: Press TT.

Swedish public television, which had recently become a two-channel system, sent journalists to the scene. However, the new channel, TV 2, couldn't broadcast that far north. There was plenty of media attention nationally, but the miners weren't able to see themselves in the various programs that covered the strike. Instead they listened to Norbottenskvarten (a local radio program). The news was heavily regulated and controlled by the state-run radio and TV – this resulted in the image of the strike conveyed in media being anything but “objective.”

For many young people, the miners came to represent the industrial working class who would revolutionize society. Different political groups had hopes as to what the miners might be able to realize ideologically for them and for society. For instance, some believed that the miners' struggle could result in a revolutionary systemic critique of both the Swedish spirit of unity between industry and labor, as it was part of the nascent anti-capitalist movement. KFML (The Communist Union of Marxist-Leninists) offered their support by spreading propaganda and providing ideological guidance. The party played an important role during the Vietnam War by organizing solidarity work through the united NLF Groups (Vietnamese Na-



Photo: Satura. Documentation by Margareta Vinterheden, Alf Israelsson.

(On the image: The filmmaker Margareta Vinterheden interviews the strike committee member Elof Luspa.)

tional Liberation Front). Members of KFML were also active in collecting means for the strike fund so that the miners could continue to strike when they didn't receive strike support from L.O.

Despite many political groups wanting to actively support the strike, the strike committee was clear that this was their strike and that no outside groups should be allowed to compromise their unity. Everyone in the group fought to achieve a united front. Appearing united strengthened their negotiating position against LKAB and made it possible for the miners to negotiate for themselves, without the involvement of L.O., as they were suspicious of the union's stance on the conflict. The strike meetings were organized according to a direct democratic principle termed "big meetings". The big meeting was the workers' highest decision-making authority during the strike.

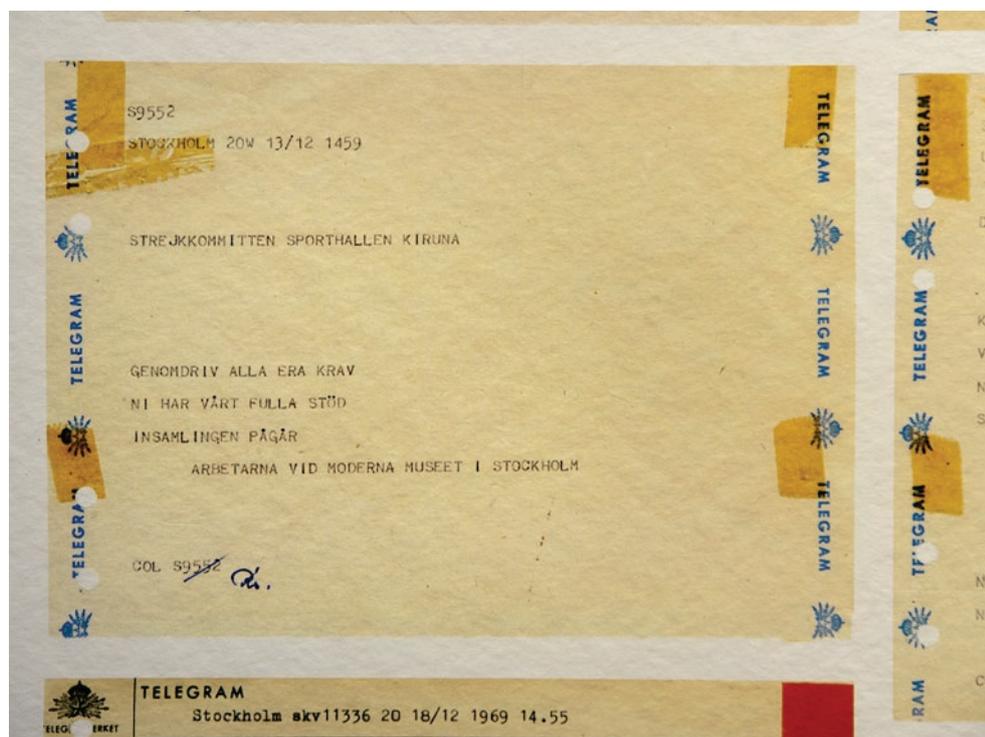
The outwardly united front would eventually cause the strike to crumble. There were many reasons why the front didn't hold, too many to detail in this article. In short, supporters of social democratic policy wanted to achieve a smooth ending to the strike after pressure from the Social Democratic party and L.O. There was fear that the wildcat strikes would threaten the basis for the spirit of unity, introduced after Saltsjöbadsavtalet (an agreement made in the 1930s between industry and L.O., supported by the government). The strike could also be used by foreign powers – the Swedish government maintained good relations with the US during the Cold War, due the threat posed by the Soviet Union. There was a well-worn conflict between Communists and Social Democrats fighting for their ideological home base at the various union chapters in the mining towns. Malmberget was more oriented toward Communists, while Social Democrats ruled the roost in Kiruna. The state secret service IB (the information bureau) oversaw the strike through wire-tapping on site. Even media worked to splinter workers. Miners often felt that journalists were painting a false image of the strike, or that they held back because media was state-run. At the time, many state institutions were run through with repressive tolerance against voices deemed too radical.

Alternative channels and forms of distribution were created in reaction to state control of public institutions. For example Filmcentrum emerged in May 1968 to organize the independent filmmakers, and provide production support, as the Swedish Film Institute was considered too conservative for experimental activities. According to Filmcentrum's motto, filmmakers should go out into society and document factories and industry using simple means in order to create quick documentary reports. A concrete suggestion for making the film project available was to use existing channels of distribution. Thus an inventory of all film projectors in all Folkets Hus (community centers) and other public venues across Sweden was made.

Through the socialist organization Clarté, the NLF-movement organized exhibitions in Stockholm where artworks were auctioned off to benefit the Vietnamese

cause. The miners' strike contributed to a continued solidarity effort and more experimental institutional activity was initiated at places like the Modern Museum and the City Museum in Stockholm in order to draw in the new social and political movements. The Modern Museum started a parallel project called "Filialen", a collaboration between the museum director Pontus Hultén and the intendent Pär Stolpe. For three years (1971-1973) "Filialen" provided space for a radical pedagogy intended to broaden the notion of visual art and to encourage a public not accustomed to contemporary art.

In this spirit of solidarity work and radicalism surrounding the miners' strike, benefit shows, fundraisers and art auctions were arranged at various places in Sweden to help the miners. At the Modern Museum an evening of solidarity was arranged with popular singers and artists. The Museum of Sundsvall collected art for sale, Galleri Heland in Stockholm also collected art for an auction. The author Sara Lidman played a key role in these solidarity efforts. At the first strike meeting in Kiruna she donated money from the proceeds of her and Odd Uhrbom's book *Gruva* [Mines] as a first contribution toward a strike fund. The money collected around the country was then put in a bank account opened for the strike fund and the artworks not sold were sent up to the strike committee. However, the strike committee decided to not sell the art, instead the miners kept them as a memento of the gift. The miners had collected more than 4.5 million Swedish kronor for their strike fund and they didn't feel that they needed to sell the art. Rather they wanted to keep it for the historical record. The miners' strike art collection consists of graphics,



Document: "Telegram". Translated quote: "You have our full support, The workers at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm"

paintings and sculptures. The collection documents one of Sweden's most famous strikes; it also documents the solidarity movement that emerged around this time in 1968.

Cultural workers launched several other initiatives during the strike, often solidarity efforts that were welcomed by the miners, but criticized by media and organizations that received support from the Social Democratic Party. Independent theater groups from Stockholm were on site to perform theater. The NJA group (Nils Johan Andersson) staged a play produced by Sweden's National Theatre, Dramaten, that was intended to be for the state-owned Norrbottens Järnverk AB in Luleå; when the strike broke out the ensemble decided to also perform it at the strike sites in the ore fields. This was harshly criticized by the board of Dramaten, which resulted in actors quitting their jobs there. Narren Theatre was also on site for a couple of months and staged a play *Solidaritet Arbetarmakt* [Solidarity, Worker power] in dialogue with workers at Malmberget. Filmmakers Alf Israelsson and Margareta Vinterheden who had grown up in the area made the documentary *Gruvstrejken 69/70* (the miners' strike 69/70). The filmmakers Lena Ewert and Lars Westman were given the responsibility to film the closed internal strike meetings, their engagement resulted in the documentary *Kamrater motståndaren är välorganiserad* [Comrades, the enemy is well organized], a film made in collaboration with a special film and editing committee consisting of miners.

The history of the great miners' strike is known within the contemporary political left movements and is still present in the collective memory of the older generation. But for the general public, it is rather unknown, and one could rather suspect that the attempts by powerful forces to hide its history have prevailed. In the current status quo of the neoliberal society, it is difficult to comprehend the ideologies that were at stake during the 68 movement, particularly as this period is remembered as the ideal state of politics in Sweden. It represents a democratic system with more social justice than we see in contemporary politics. However, the event of the strike, at the time of evolving criticism by the 68 politics, could have been addressed publicly by the Social Democratic Party, as a self-analytical example towards its past conflicts with the left to regain momentum. But the Social Democratic labour movement has never had the ability to self reflect over its hegemonic and reformist role; it is now occupied with moving to the middle politics in post capitalism renouncing ideologies of the past as it seeks to regain power.

Often the historic event of a strike is generally spoken of in terms of nostalgia, but to address historical struggles as pure nostalgia diminishes the work that was put at stake for those active in the opposition. The outstanding and broad social engagement and activism for the strikers cause is particularly interesting as it included different fields of culture workers who mirrored the situation in various works. In retrospect, the strike event contributed to the radicalization of the general cultural landscape in Sweden, which could fuel the spirit of art workers struggles. Actors



Photo: Documentation by Pål Sommelius. "The Miners' Strike Art Collection" (at Gällivare museum), Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm.

from various cultural fields stepped up to support the strike and thus promote a more equal society. Curators were putting solidarity posters up publicly. Theatre companies put up plays in the mining district and filmmakers documented the course of the strike on site. Artists and musicians organized petitions and collections for the strikers in Stockholm; at cultural institutions experimental activities were established to capture the new social and political movements.

*Since 2010, artist, Ingela Johansson (Sweden), has been working on her investigation "What happened to the art of the strike?". She examined the great miners' strike of 1969/70 as it related to the general radicalization of the artistic and cultural landscape in the wake of the 1968 uprising. The project has taken various forms, in which Johansson has worked with archival materials from the time of the strike. She has shown "The Miners' Strike Art Collection" (at Gällivare museum) in collaboration with Bildmuseet in Umeå (2012) and Tensta Konsthall (2013). She has also staged this material as theater, and organized "Witness seminars" in collaboration with Södertörn University in Stockholm.*

#### Note

The article is a compilation of the 500 page book, *The art of the strike, voices on cultural and political work during and after the mining strike 1969-70*. Ingela Johansson has collected documents of various kinds that use the strike as a point of departure and the actions of solidarity and support, which were carried out by artists, writers, musicians, actors, filmmakers and other groups. To these strike documents she added conversations with people who were involved in various capacities. The conversations took place between 2010 and 2013, either on site in the mining district, at other locations across the country, over telephone, Skype or email. The material on which the assemblages in the book are based consist of newspaper articles, excerpts from books, protocols, letters and more, as well as of sound-recordings from strike meetings, seminars, witness seminars, speeches and conversations. They comment on the societal events in '68 and the collective memory of the course of the strike. Ingela Johansson has collected the materials and conducted the interviews, in part with Kim Einarsson. The material has been assembled and edited in collaboration with Kim Einarsson and Martin Högröm, who have also created the graphic design.

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Tatiana Fiodorova, Artist, 2015.

# Education in the Museum – A Space of Political Emancipation?

**Bojana Piškur**

This text is based on the concepts, working methodologies, and deliberations of institutions conducted by the initiative Radical Education (RE) between 2006 to 2014. RE was initiated as a project within a public art institution – the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana – in order for it, through analysis of its own work, to direct itself towards a different level of relationship with this institution and others like it.

With (those) groups that are not “only” artist collectives, like Radical Education, in most cases we are not dealing exclusively with visual material. These kinds of groups do not perceive art merely as a “form”, representation of some political or social reality, but as a new, different kind of “aesthetics” that emerges at the crossroads of politics, art, social criticism and engagement. At the same time, with groups that enter art institutions in different ways, the following question almost always arises: “In which ways do you avoid the hegemony of representation so that the work process, research methods or political action do not fall into the trap of a participative-multicultural project?”

Concerning these kinds of antagonisms, Antonio Negri, at a conference<sup>1</sup> in the Regina Sofia Museum that took place last March, brought up an open question: “What does it actually mean for us today to have a museum?” He understood this question in the sense of active deliberation of our role and relationship towards museums, not only in the field of art as such, but also in a broader sociopolitical context.

On the other hand, these questions are very much related to the ideas of a different type of museum or with what is today called “other institutionality.” For this reason I will first make a short survey of some of these practices, since the ideas of new



Exhibition of the Women's Antifascist Front of Yugoslavia, the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, 1948. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.

institutionalism are also a continuation of our Radical Education project and of the relationship between this collective/process/work methodology and art institutions. Radical Education did not therefore develop in a vacuum, but as a long-time process of deliberation of different practices, especially those connected with the experience of socialism and new social movements.

Alexander Bogdanov,<sup>2</sup> right after the October Revolution in 1918, wrote the so-called first Bolshevik utopian story “Red Star”, in which he writes about living in communism on the planet Mars. Among other things, he writes about museums, namely, of the idea of art in such a communist community, and says: “In socialism, art will spread in the society in order to enrich life everywhere. As for our museums, they are scientific-research institutes, schools, in which we teach the development of art, or more precisely, the development of humanity through artistic activities.”

In the article “Proletarian Culture”, published in Ljubljana in 1930 in the magazine *Delavec* [Worker], the relationship between the worker and culture is analyzed, and the need to free the worker from the influences of the civil culture that requires him to work, think and behave only in one determined way. The author writes that workers have to engage themselves in experiments with different kinds of art and thus at the same time create new forms of collective living. The proletarian culture must be egalitarian and collective, as opposed to the bourgeois culture, which prefers individual poetics, hierarchy and elitism. There is striving towards certain kinds

of emancipation, like the one Angelica Balabanoff, Russian-Italian sociologist, wrote about in the 1920s. She claimed that the workers' problem lied in their being intellectually carefree and indifferent so that it was necessary to incite in them a sense of need for participating in different cultural activities like: systemic lessons about culture, press that makes the worker participate in cultural events, books that stimulate thinking. She felt that the best method was discussion, since it enabled the worker to reexamine his or her own conceptions, feel his or her own experiences and seek explanations for the concepts he or she did not understand. She also sees in this the beginning of independent thinking, some kind of radical pedagogy.

Of course, such ideas can be found in other contexts too; for example in Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire, or in French philosopher Jacques Ranciere and his "Ignorant Schoolmaster", and in many different theorists and practitioners of different kinds of pedagogy. These realizations influenced the RE collective as well, especially when they were collaborating with migrant workers in the Social Center Rog in Ljubljana. Or later, when, in different context, the "Marx's Worker's Inquiry" was being conducted among cultural workers (we will discuss this a little later).

If we consider the museums in Yugoslavia and their relationship towards the so-called proletarian culture we can, as early as the end of the Second World War, see the role that the museum pedagogue had (they were not called that then) and the idea of "education for all", and the need to bring art closer to everyone. Certainly, this was also very much connected to the tradition that culture played during the



Exhibition of the Women's Antifascist Front of Yugoslavia, the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, 1948. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.



Exhibition of the Women's Antifascist Front of Yugoslavia, the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, 1948. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.

Second World War in the National Liberation Struggle (an example of partisan art). During the self-management, all museum workers were called cultural workers, which was an integral part of the cultural policy of the time.<sup>3</sup> Workers' organizations organized different thematic fine art exhibitions in factories and enterprises, there were cinema and photo clubs, literary workshops in factories and much more. These were at the same time the spaces in which they could experiment with form, and the very contents of art. For example, especially well-known are the experimental films developed in cinema clubs in this period. Didactic exhibitions like the "Contemporary Art I" project in 1957, in the City Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb, travelled around Yugoslav cities, while actually being an exhibition composed exclusively out of reproductions of works of art. Likewise, in the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, in 1948, immediately after the opening of the gallery, an exhibition was laid out about the Women's Antifascist Front (WAF), which was political propaganda, but was at the same time a good example of an educational didactic exhibition. Of course, today we can be critical towards the very way in which an art space served for the purposes of propaganda, but, on the other hand, we can, through examples such as this one reexamine the very role of museum, museum as a space of contemplation, or museum as a social and political space, and museum as a space of class antagonism. For whom is the museum? For the intellectual elite, or for everyone? And how does this "everyone" enter and participate equally in the museum?

The aforementioned questions are not new, and the long tradition of dealing with these issues does not relate only to the period of post-October Russia. There are numerous examples, like the one during the Second Spanish Republic in the 1930s, when there existed "Misiones Pedagógicas", which implied "bringing" the so-called high culture (for example, reproductions of paintings from the Prado Museum) to the people in the poorest villages of Spain, who never had access to this kind of culture. Another example is the "Museum of Solidarity" in Santiago de Chile, the story of which begins in 1972, during the world's first democratically elected Marx-

Santiago, April 26, 1972. (S)

Mr. Salvador Allende Gossens  
President of the Republic of Chile

Mr. Président.

On behalf of a large number of plastic artists of various countries who have generously decided to gather a collection of art works to start with them a museum for the Chilean people, proffering~~g~~ thus their solidarity to Chile at this moment of its political life, I beg to address you, to forward these works to you as the mandatary and representative of this process. I am taking this step in my quality of President of the Committee for Artistic Solidarity with Chile, together with Mr. Danilo Tréilles, Secretary of the same Committee.

I wish to stress the importance of this gesture of the artists all over the world, who prove with it their solidarity to the Chilean people who are engaged in the difficult and heroic way of socialism. Their gesture is prompted by a sentiment of fraternity and a desire to support this very brave experiment. Where was this idea born? in truth, it appeared spontaneously in the artists' heart, precisely because they are artists. However, we must mention the names of José María Moreno Galván and Carlo Levi, who had the initiative of promoting this movement when they were in Santiago ~~last~~ March<sup>1970</sup>. In Chile the work was coordinated and stimulated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Cultural Department of the Presidency and the Latin American Art Institute.

handed down)

Many works are already here to be ~~handed~~ handed down to you, Mr. President. ~~Many more are still coming~~ They are the seeds of the museum that the artists of the world wish to donate to the new Chile. More works will come in the future, for the source of solidarity will not dry out as long as Chile goes ahead ~~on~~ with the efforts of its people and its government towards liberating renewal. That is why your suggestion was very happy, Mr. President, when, in view of this stupenduous movement of international support to Chile, and corresponding to the aspiration of this Committee when we called at your office, you expressed your idea of creating with these works a "The Museum of Solidarity". It is a characteristic of the good ideas that they do not appear either too soon or too late, but at the moment marked by history. The Museum of Solidarity expresses in a most perfect way something hitherto unknown in the cultural history of our epoch: A museum constituted by ~~donations~~ spontaneous donations of artists of all countries, moved by solidarity towards a small country at the furthest part of the world, now engaged in a revolutionary march ~~inwards~~ towards socialism by its own means, along the lines of its cultural standards, faithful to its democratic traditions and respectful of essential liberties of mankind, among which is included that freedom of expression and creation.

Mário Pedrosa's letter to president Salvador Allende, 1972. Courtesy of Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende, Santiago, Chile.

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1 This spirit of fraternity is precisely what links these donations into an indissoluble whole, so that they may never be dispersed and given different destinations and directions. The artists donate them for a museum that will not disappear as time passes but will remain at ~~xxx~~ all events as that for which it was created: a monument of cultural solidarity to the Chilean people in an exceptional moment of their history.

2 To insure the inseparableness of the donated works, now included in the ~~catalogue~~ <sup>the</sup> collection of the museum that is being formed, the Committee suggests, on behalf of the artists, that these works be considered as ~~part of a~~ fund of a public foundation to be legally constituted. Such a foundation would be the most adequate ~~expression~~ <sup>the</sup> of the wish expressed by the artists now giving their works for the creation of a Museum of Modern and Experimental Art in Chile, under the name given to it by the circumstances of its creation: The Museum of Solidarity.

3 Our Committee thanks you, Mr. President, for the destination of the necessary space in the building of UNCTAD III to lodge the valuable collection already received, to which will be added other works that have been promised and will shortly arrive. This collection will make of our museum the most important one of Latin America, and the only one of its kind.

4 The donors' wish is that their works be presented to the public and permanently accessible to the Chilean people. More than that, their ~~inimitable~~ <sup>aspiration</sup> aspiration is that all workers, from ~~xxx~~ factories and mines, from the ~~towns~~ <sup>paper quarters</sup> and from the fields, be put in contact with them and consider them as part of their patrimony. The artists' hope, and ours too, is that we may in this way contribute to the spontaneous creative power of the people, so that it may flow freely in support to the revolutionary transformation of Chile. Thus, we think that the Museum of Solidarity must be such as to serve as a model, in its specific functions, in its democratic wide scope. It must be the natural stage for the most fruitful ~~xxx~~ cultural expressions of the new Chile, consequent to its advance on the way to socialism. These are the most enthusiastic wishes of the artists of the world, who contribute to this end by bringing the product of their creative force.

Mario Pedrosa  
President  
Committee for Artistic Solidarity  
with Chile

Mário Pedrosa's letter to president Salvador Allende, 1972. Courtesy of Museo de la Solidaridad Salvador Allende, Santiago, Chile.

ist president, Salvador Allende. At the same time in the world, under the auspices of UNESCO, began discussions about a different role of the museum in society. At the international seminar of museum workers of Latin America in Santiago de Chile, where the so-called social or socialist museum was discussed, a new model of *integrated museum* was proposed, which was supposed to connect cultural rehabilitation and political emancipation. By all means, it was especially important here

to take into consideration the very context of Latin America and the history of dictatorships and class divisions in this geopolitical area. The museum was, in this way, supposed to actively participate in social and cultural changes, to be progressive, but not being ideologically limited in any way by political representation or being merely a propaganda machine. The Museum of Solidarity Salvador Allende was jointly deliberated by Mário Pedrosa (at that time exiled from Brazil due to dictatorship) and president Allende himself, and it had the purpose to become a workers' museum, or as Allende once said: "This museum will not be just a museum. It will be a workers' museum." The example of this museum could perhaps serve as an excellent illustration of an *integrated museum* had it not been closed in 1973, during Pinochet's coup d'état.

This museum was very specific because in it there was no "classical political propaganda" like the mentioned WAF exhibition at the Museum of Modern Arts (MMA); it was founded exclusively on donations of artists from all around the world. Besides the new museological vocation, one of the most important components was international solidarity and support. Artists donated their works, believing in a new and different society. And this meant several thousands of works, by artists such as Joan Miró, Alexander Calder, artists of abstract expressionism from the USA (which in fact is a great paradox), conceptual artists like Sol Le Witt, artists-participants of Documenta 5 in Kassel<sup>4</sup> and many others.

This idea was present earlier as well and includes not only the creation of new works of art, but also educational, cultural tasks in the service of the revolution, where the artistic creation becomes an active process. Thus art becomes a way and a means of organization of the collective social system and the role of a certain class (proletariat) in it.

In the RE, from the very beginning (2006), the ways of opening the museum for all were deliberated, as well as of politicization of the museum and bringing different practices from the "outside" into the very context of some art institutions. However, the RE was at the same time a rather heterogeneous group of people (anthropologists, sociologists, anarchists, artists, pedagogues, migrant workers) with different experiences of working in communities (of migrant workers, asylum seekers, the erased, with the Zapatistas in Chiapas, the Piqueteros in Argentina, with the HI-JOS in Guatemala, etc.), and institutions (faculties, museums), so as a consequence of this, very different ideas arose on what museum space actually was and to whom it served.

The RE was formed in a time when the alter-globalist movements (post Seattle, post Geneva) was already exhausted to a certain degree and when intensive deliberations on how to proceed began. Is it also possible to be in some kind of league (alliance) with the classical type of institutions, as, for example, universities and museums? What are the products of such encounters? What are the new "non-

ster-institutions”<sup>5</sup> like, politically speaking? Is there a possibility for a joint struggle against capitalism and exploitation, and in which ways? One of the first actions, when the idea of the RE was actually conceived, was the occupation of the “Rog” bicycle factory in Ljubljana, in 2006. The “Rog” opened up crucial questions of joint space in the city, access and usage of these spaces, politicization of public space, and the question of how to connect with other institutions.<sup>6</sup>

The RE tried from the very beginning to connect two institutions: the museum (MG) and the Rog Social Center. The starting point was the idea that the RE was not and did not want to be “just another” participative project within the museum, because temporary solidarities of this kind (for example, limited work with different marginal groups, namely, the so-called “projections of politics as something else and outside”) only divert from the politics here and now. There was an attempt to make some kind of contact between the social movement and one art institution, so that, in this way, some new institutional forms of resistance could be found, in which resistance would be considered a joint space of encounter, some kind of new “aesthetics”, in Paolo Virno’s sense of the word.

I feel that this is especially important since it puts into the foreground the thesis that there also exist different kinds of aesthetics that are not linked exclusively to “art as object” (here is also hidden the criticism of the idea of participation of which Claire Bishop writes), but also the ones that are based on the creation of “joint”,



Exhibition of the Women’s Antifascist Front of Yugoslavia, the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, 1948. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.

but joint in the sense of production ways (joint concepts, live knowledge), different forms of cooperation (based on the tradition of radical pedagogy and methods of co-research/militant research) and ways of opening the space of political. Then education is not only a “model” any more, but it becomes a specific micro-political situation that can develop in most diverse spaces in the form of different alliances and collective actions. The way of mutual cooperation and joint work is also very important since it is hard to enter activists’ circles “as a gate-crasher” and start research or a project ad hoc. We are in fact dealing with a long process that is primarily based on trust, having in mind that rather “fragile” political subjectivities are most often involved.

As was previously mentioned, the RE understood theory from the very beginning as a process in the forming of a new political artistic subjectivity. Theory was simultaneously practice and vice versa, practice was part of theory. This is much more important because in debates and discussions with the most diverse groups of people, concepts and ideas like the following were considered: work, precarious work, cognitive work, common good, class antagonism, emancipation, artistic autonomy, etc. As it is generally known, a series of problems always arise in such contexts, like the one with translation, the problem of language usage, etc., however many of these kinds of projects strove to be distanced from “intellectual arrogance”. This was also the subject of a series of seminars that were organized in cooperation with the SC Rog and the MG. One of the themes was “Resistance as Creation”, which was organized with the “invisible” workers of the world, asylum seekers, activists, cultural workers, and in which there were discussions about relationship between social centers, artist and political collectives, ways of communication and cooperation with the local community, questions of usage of public and common spaces in the city, etc. We should keep in mind that this period of late 2007/ early 2008, was a period of large construction investments in Slovenia, of making private-public partnerships, of the arrival of almost 80,000 immigrant workers from Bosnia who worked in very poor conditions, and that, at the same time, all those problems were almost completely invisible in Slovenia itself, namely, it was evident that there lacked any kind of political engagement concerning all those issues.

During the seminar entitled “To Think Politics: New Concepts in Political Activism”, the RE, together with people from the Infoshop (anarchists), young political philosophers from the DPU (Delavsko-punkerska univerza)<sup>7</sup> and people from the social movements that were active as early as the 1980s, discussed the possibilities of recognizing realistic alternatives in the movements and concepts like: Zapatism, political communities of the “erased”, autonomous workers’ unions, etc. The question with which the workshop dealt is the question of different political expressions in the local political system. Naturally, today, after six years, we cannot think in the same way. After the big demonstrations in Slovenia two years ago, the alternative political scene dissolved completely, primarily due to criminalization of a part of these protests, that is, of their certain participants, by the state apparatus, and then also due to the appropriation of demonstrations by the existing parliamentary parties.

But the important thing in all these processes, seminars, debates, etc., was that they were all based on reexamination of one's own position and critical analysis of one's own work in relation to the collective. If someone today posed the question how to understand the RE in relation to the Museum of Modern Art, the answer would probably be that the RE was in fact "a series of failures". This meaning of the RE is certainly not negative – which is a small paradox – but quite the opposite. This process, project, methodology or collective called the RE, was never realized in a way for it to become the brand of an institution, specifically the MG. It never quite lived up to the expectations of what a project, a seminar or an exhibition should achieve and in which way, because with the RE there always existed a "space of unpredictable." Today it is clear that it was that very space that had in itself the biggest political potential.

The RE project often had invitations to take part in different seminars, conferences, debates, and actions, which it did. But after some time, the activity of the participants was reduced to only traveling and talking about what they thought should be done, and not actually doing it in local communities. This also conceals the paradox of such illusory privilege of activism in the framework of the art scene, due to which many cultural workers do not even notice the contradictoriness of their positions torn between the privileges of a certain class and exploitation within the extended workers' class, to which more or less all the cognitive workers belong today.

Out of such observations arose a different type of research related to the "Marx's Workers' Inquiry", which at the same time had the purpose of self-education. This is also significant for the reasons of which Franco "Bifo" Berardi speaks when he wonders how it is possible to explain the transformation of working men and working women from dissatisfaction to acceptance of work. Although, surely, one of the reasons is political defeat from which the labor class has been suffering since the late 1970s, according to him, the biggest reason for this transformation lies in the loss of eros in everyday life and in the investing of desire into work, which in this way becomes the only place that provides narcissistic strengthening of individuals. The effects of this are a general loss of solidarity, non-existence of workers' community, and the occurrence of the imperative of competitiveness.

The "Marx's Workers' Inquiry" was developed in 1981 with the purpose to redefine the position of the French proletariat. The inquiries that the RE conducted were adapted to the local situation. The first inquiry took place in the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, in 2010, in the form of collaborative research conducted by two collectives: the "Workers' Inquiry" group and the RE. The "Workers' Inquiry" was in fact a group of doctoral students who were doing a part of their studies in the Reina Sofia Museum.

The inquiry was sent to workers (450 surveyed) of this, the biggest Spanish museum, as a questionnaire, and it served as a trigger for numerous discussions, above all concerning the way in which “the spaces that are relatively closed for dialogue can be detonated and disturbed.” The inquiry had 80 questions that were related to several subjects: education, current employment, type of contract, social security, conflicts at work, censorship, and sociopolitical positions. Out of 450 inquiries, the answers were anonymously submitted by little less than 10% of the employees. As it turned out, the biggest problems were “fear” and “self-censorship” of the workers. The analysis of these data was organized in multiple debates, in the museum itself and in some social centers in Madrid, together with other activists’ groups. One of the big frustrations of this research, that is, the inquiry, was the absence of answers from the employees in the museum. However, as it turned out during the analysis, in an intervention such as this in a type of institution like the Reina Sofia, each answer is good enough, including the one not received, because the reasons for this absence are equally important as the received answers. The analysis of the research should have been published in the magazine of this museum as well, but it was, in the end, censored by the museum management without explanation.

The group from Madrid and the RE met later with the cultural workers in Belgrade too, and together they organized a series of seminars on the theme of work relationships and the experience of working in cultural institutions in Serbia. The inquiry was then revised according to the sphere of Serbian culture, in this case, in cooperation with the group Škart. Here it has the form of an interview with the cultural workers, active in the field of culture and politics, the majority of which had conflicts at their jobs.

One of the goals of this inquiry was to point out different ways and levels of exploitation of the examinees, which could potentially stimulate further actions against the commodification of their work. The key to the understanding of exploitation lies in determining the way in which it shapes the work and life of workers, from flexibility of work to the absence of social security and health insurance, uncertain working conditions, etc. Likewise, what is certainly clear here is that today we can no longer speak of some kind of autonomy in art. While the artistic production still enjoys relative creative freedom, the deterioration of material conditions for the artistic work, the increasingly smaller control that artists have over reproduction of their own ideas, practices, goods, pushes artists into a kind of contract with the capital, namely into wage labor. The question of the way in which the division between the artistic production and wage labor could be overcome has become not only a question of survival strategy, but also a political problem. In this problem Virno anticipates one of his crucial theses: “Is it possible to separate something that is united today – intellect and wage labor, and to unite that which is separated – intellect and political action?”



Exhibition of the Women's Antifascist Front of Yugoslavia, the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, 1948. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.

The analyses of the inquiries were published in a booklet. The goal of the analysis was to show that the main neuralgic points that preclude joint solidarity and struggle against the existing condition are the following: large degree of alienation from the products of work, unstable life, fragmentation of working time, high level of censorship and self-censorship, self-exploitation and the imperative of competitiveness. One of the crucial problems is also the fact, which Virno especially emphasizes, that the post-Fordist work absorbed in itself many of the so-called typical characteristics of political action.

The RE in the last year, it could be said – cancelled itself, that is to say, it came to the edge where this kind of intervention in the space of an art institution became unnecessary. Certainly, not unnecessary in the sense that the museum became an ideal institution, but that the ideas of the RE became a part of deliberation strategies on new types of institutionalism within the museum itself. This is also visible through newly-formed collectives among the employees, exhibitions and debates that intervene in different critical ways in the reality of the museum, not only as institutional criticism but social as well, which often points to various antagonisms hidden inside the museum.

In the end, I would like to mention another example from the RE practice in the museum that connected different subjectivities; artistic and activist, and the people from the anti-psychiatry movement active since as early as the 1980s. This occurred

this year in the context of the “Politicalization of Friendship” project, where concepts of total institutions and ways of opening such institutions were deliberated. There was consideration on what the meaning of creativity was and what the common articles of artistic creativity and madness were. What can we learn from madness? In the 1980s this movement attempted, through radical education of psychiatric profession, to change society’s relationship towards madness, the psychiatrists’ relationship towards the patient, and the hierarchical relationships themselves in psychiatric institutions in Slovenia, leaning in the process on the ideas of Félix Guattari and Franco Basaglia. At the exhibition itself, together with people from psychiatric institutions, activists and the engaged students of social work, a kind of “didactic exhibition” was organized that included photographs, film, diaries, letters and notes that were all shown in the museum space with works of Yugoslav surrealists and a film of Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica. It turned out, interestingly, that there were actually no differences in formal or conceptual sense between the works. At the accompanying debates in the museum there was also discussion about deinstitutionalization today, that is, about the demands to close psychiatric institutions and open centers for communities of psychiatry users. The so-called psychiatry “users” took equal part in these discussions.

What is important to say in the end is that the “Radical Education” project was never something fixed in some predictable form, method, way of work and similar, but above all an entrance into the unknown domain of politics. This, at the same time, also represented the risks that could have lead to something new, to the experience of intensiveness, to a break with the already existing, to some new discovery, but also to failure. This is why it is hard today to interpret what the RE actually was; a collective, project, research method, concept or all this together. But, what is certain is that in those eight years the RE succeeded in opening a new space of deliberation inside the museum.

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#### **Endnotes**

1 The conference was called “The New Abduction of Europe” (2014), with participation of activist collectives and museums of contemporary art from Europe.

2 Alexander Bogdanov was one of the key persons gathered around the Russian Proletkult.

3 For example, in Slovenia, during the 1950s, agitprop maker Boris Zihlerl wrote about socialist cultural revolution.

4 A major role was played here by Harald Szeemann, as one of the main advocates of this project.

5 Monster-institutions is a concept deliberated jointly by activists from different social centers in Europe.

6 It is no accident that a guest of the first occupied factory was none other than Antonio Negri.

7 <http://dpu.mirovni-institut.si/>, 27.01.2015, 16h

The text is the result of Bojana Piškur’s lecture held at the Nova Gallery in Zagreb, currently run by What, How and For Whom? (WHW), in December 2014. This version is first published in English. It appeared in Serbo-Croatian in April 2015 at <http://dematerijalizacijaumetnosti.com>

# Activist Club or On the Concept of Cultural Houses, Social Centers & Museums. What is the Use of Art?

**Dmitry Vilensky**

The legacy of Socialist Houses of Culture, the recent experiences of social centers and the progressive politics of some museums and art institutions, with their focus on participatory projects and new forms of publicness have moved to the fore issues related to the use value of art practice and aesthetic experiences.

In my view, the most crucial issue is what is art's emancipatory role in society? How can we find a way today to continue not only the project of *Bildung* —the process of individual development via aesthetic education (despite all the obvious sympathy for it) —but also find a new continuation for the project of art and thought as tools of a radical transformation of people's collective consciousness?

Since Schiller's time, the goal of art as aesthetic education was the harmonious development of the individual, the formation of a mature person capable of creativity. This concept, however, was oriented toward the individual bourgeois subject: it led to the formation of the egoistic individual. It is clear that a return to this concept today would be reactionary. At the same time, I think that there is a general consensus about the statement that today's decisive battle is shaping up around the production of subjectivities.

## **Activist Club**

Seven years ago, in trying to answer this question we have produced the project "Activist Club." Its genealogy is obviously rooted in the process of the development of so-called Workers' Cultural Houses in the Soviet Union and in general



Chto Delat, Rosa's Cultural House, St. Petersburg, 2015.

to the ideas promoted by Soviet Productionism, which in the starkest form posed the program of “life-construction.” As Boris Arvatov declared in his book *Art and Production*: “Art as an immediate and deliberately employed instrument of life-construction: such is the formula for the existence of proletarian art.”<sup>1</sup>



Chito Delat, Rosa’s Cultural House, St. Petersburg, 2015.

Can we share these sentiments today? And where can we find a way to continue the project of “proletarian art” today? On the one hand, we are living during the prolonged transition to post-Fordism and knowledge capitalism. The farewell to the production line frees our hands — but where is that factory the Productionists dreamed of today? What once upon a time was a source of hope for progress and emancipation turned out, historically, to be a reactionary phenomenon that had to be overcome. The formation of “new political subjects” whose analysis Italian operaismo undertook in the sixties, is the complete opposite of what the Productionists hoped for. The natural exodus of workers from the factory began, and along with it the “assembly line/collectivist” model of subject formation and the forms of its political organization also began to collapse.

Where can we find that factory today, or those means of production, whose seizure would supply us with an emancipatory impulse as precise as possible? Today this factory is nowhere and everywhere. The development of capitalism allows us to see the production of false subjectivity in the totality of capitalistic practices, which are now realized everywhere: in the thick of daily life, in institutions of culture, in the very networks of social interaction. It is this understanding that opens up new zones of struggle, not simply for non-alienated labor and knowledge, but also for the break with labor and production.

In this new situation, although I have a clear sense that many activists might not agree with me, I think that we need another kind of knowledge and art as never before. We need it as we need fresh air: we need it to produce “oxygen” in an atmosphere totally polluted by the byproducts of the “creative industries.” But what should this knowledge/art look like? Where is the place where it can be useful and meaningful?

### **Political art vs. Avant-garde**

Let’s look at the current situation with the development of art practices that merge aesthetics, art and activism.

Over the last decade, a number of artists and writers have succeeded in both realizing and finding the theoretical grounding for a variety of works, which allow us to speak of a new situation in art. These projects have found points of connection between art, new technologies, and the global movement against neoliberal capitalism and austerity measures. The lineages of this new interest in political art can be traced back to Documenta 10 (1997) and coincide with the emergence of the “movement of movements,” which erupted onto the political horizon in Seattle in 1999. This situation has subsequently been manifested through a variety of cultural projects, whose critical stance towards the process of capitalist globalization and emphasis on the principles of self-organization, self-publishing and a political understanding of autonomy – as the realization of political tasks outside the parliamentary system of power (and outside the comfortable realm of art institutions) – all these factors have evoked the idea of a return to “the political” in art.

But to conceive of these artistic processes simply as “political” would be to seriously underestimate the situation we find ourselves in. There is evidence that what we are actually talking about can be interpreted as the emergence of an artistic movement: its participants are concerned with developing a common terminology based on the political understanding of aesthetics and autonomy; their praxis is based on confrontational approaches towards the cultural industry. This finds consistent realization in the international framework of projects carried out in networks of self-organized collectives working in direct interaction with activists groups, progressive institutions, different publications, online resources and so on.

From history we know that such traits were once one of the characteristics of the avant-garde. However, many people today see the avant-garde as something discredited by the Soviet experience, where the “dictatorship of the proletariat” rapidly degenerated into a “dictatorship over the proletariat” – a totalitarian situation that most activists and artists explicitly reject. But despite the anti-vanguardist principles of the “movement of movements,” I believe that some of the essential features of the avant-garde are crucial for understanding contemporary art.



Chto Delat, Rosa's Cultural House, St. Petersburg, 2015.

As Jacques Rancière once mentioned (and I fully agree with him): “If the concept of the avant-garde has any meaning in the aesthetic regime of the arts, it is [...] not on the side of the advanced detachments of artistic innovation, but on the side of the invention of sensible forms and material structures of life to come.”<sup>2</sup> But at the same time, today there is an enormous problem for any kind of revolutionary thought and aesthetics, which has limited opportunities to verify these “forms and material structures of life to come” in practice.

Our collective has its own position: we need to institute our own structure, and Chto Delat sees itself as a new type of institution based on the principle of crystallization. What does that entail? It means that we are not trying to dissolve our works in life, but do something just opposite to it – we are trying to crystallize some art practices in a variety of different situations – inside and outside the framework of cultural institutions.

### **Workers' Club and social centers**

We also find ourselves closer to these issues, because in Russia we had to withdraw (and being aggressively pushed out) from the beginning from art territory and remain active in the other fields, mostly realizing and representing our works in a framework of different activists groups, civil society NGOs, social forums, universities and the Internet.

The project Activist Club started in 2006 from my workshop with young Italian art students and activists – organized in the framework of the project “Common House,” curated by Marco Skotini at Teseco Art Foundation in Pisa.

The idea for this project obviously originated from the concept of the Workers’ Club introduced in the USSR in the mid-1920s and well known through the famous piece made by Alexander Rodchenko. Created in 1925 for the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris, it was never produced in real life. It was thus a kind of model of how such a places should be organized. The piece introduced a western bourgeois audience to the completely different method of staging cultural activities in workers’ free time in the USSR (such as “Lenin’s Corner,” a space for gatherings and seminars, or the performance of “Live Newspapers,” etc.)

The task of the Workers’ Club was to provide workers with orientation on issues of political struggle and to introduce them to a different type of aesthetic experience and practicing art in the form of seminars, lectures and workshops. It critically undermined the obsolete idea of an idle consumer, who could derive pleasure and “emancipate” himself from shabby everyday existence through the experience of the art object in the museum. It was about building a space based on educational methodology, creativity and participation.



Chto Delat, Rosa’s Cultural House, St. Petersburg, 2015.

There is a growing interest in this concept and even direct reconstructions of workers clubs. Of course there have been several recent attempts to reconstruct this piece. Christiane Post attempted something like this at the 6th Werkleitz Biennale; there was an installation by Susan Kelly, “What is to be done?”; and a reading room at the exhibition Forms of Protest, at Van Abbe Museum just to mention a few.

When we were preparing our first approach to the concept of an activist club in Pisa in 2006, I came across a publication by bookstorming.com and Galerie Decimus Magnus Art Editeurs, meticulous documentation of the reconstruction of Rodchenko’s Workers’ Club done by the French artist Michel Aubry. It was very inspiring to see one of the most famous works of the Russian avant-garde in an amazingly detailed reconstruction. Also, it shed light on many details of the composition that were not visible in the historical photographic documentation of the project.

But we were not interested in a reconstruction, but rather in a process that I call the “actualization” of the general idea of what the concept of the workers’ club is about – actualization in a Benjamin-sense, as the process of reclaiming its missed chance today.

For historical materialists history develops through the chain of events – revolutions (moments of popular mobilizations) and catastrophes. Each of them is the culmination of revolutionary struggle for emancipation and its temporal collapse. It is quite important to conclude that the formation of a new subjectivity is not only shaped in relation to the current political situation, but also finds its shape in relation to the past. Why go backwards? Because the possibility of “becoming” is located not only in the possibilities of the present, but is also rooted in the actualization of all lost opportunities in the past.

So we have decided to concentrate on working on the concept of an activist club. And we keep believing that it makes sense to realize it in the form of an art project. With the idea of the activist club we are talking about a self-imposed challenge that is, to a certain extent, comparable with that once placed by the Soviet government on Rodchenko: namely, to show the bourgeois public another means of producing the space where art can come together with political learning and subjectivation.

Another aspect of our inspiration was the current discussion on the concept and role of social centers. It is important to notice that there is a move from the side of progressive museums to reconsider their public role. This was one topic of discussion at the recent conference at the MACBA, “Molecular Museum. Towards a New Kind of Institutionality” (2008), which tackled the relationships between museums and social centers. I think that for all of us the concept of the social center, as a place where art might be able to reveal its pure use-value and ignore its exchange value, is very important.



Chto Delat, Rosa's Cultural House, St. Petersburg, 2015.

The new social centers strive to engage a broad caste of oppressed people and give them a chance to encounter culture and combine it with fighting for their rights of recognition. The discussion about the future of social centers can be connected with the concept of the workers' club developed in the Soviet Union, because they share an approach to the value of art and the ways in which people can participate in its production.

But let's look more closely at the concept of the Workers' Club and its late implementation in the everyday life of the Soviet Union in the form of workers' cultural centers – or “Houses of Culture.” What was the meaning of that project?

There is unfortunately very little research on this topic – carried out during the Soviet era and later when the whole system had practically collapsed – but we should take into account the dimension of these developments. In 1988 there were over 137,000 club establishments in the Soviet Union. And I think that everyone of my generation had some positive experiences of these places.

The House of Culture (Dom Kultury) was an establishment for many various recreational activities and hobbies: sports, collecting, arts. The Palace of Culture (this term was very often used as well) was designed to have room for all kinds of projects. A typical Palace contained one or several movie theaters, halls, concert hall(s), dance studios, various do-it-yourself hobby groups, photo and film studios, painting and drawing courses, amateur radio, and a public library. All of these groups were free of charge until most recently. These houses usually were built and run by the trade union organization of one factory, but they were often established by local authorities – the local soviets – and served the general public. They especially focused on children’s after-school education.

So it was a structure that embraced all kinds of so-called creative developments of a person. Rodchenko’s room was a quite modest proposal for designing just one module-space, but a few years after his Workers’ Club, it became the biggest challenge for many famous architects to construct entire huge buildings that could serve all these purposes.

It is clear that the concept of social centers is rather close to the idea of People’s Cultural Houses, and I think that these experiences should be more closely studied and continued in the form of constructing a counter public sphere. So right now – at a moment when the possibilities to address society at large are more and more limited we need places where the crystallization of certain excluded communities and positions – can happen and we need to focus on the long process of learning and find an alternative ways of distributing the knowledge. These places could “function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment and/or as training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics.”<sup>3</sup>



Chto Delat, Rosa’s Cultural House, St. Petersburg, 2015.

I think that right now, at a time with very limited opportunities for the development of a culture of the oppressed, we should rethink the old question posed by Paulo Freire: “[I]f the implementation of a liberating education requires political power and the oppressed have none, how then is it possible to carry out the pedagogy of the oppressed prior to the revolution? This is a question of the greatest importance; one aspect of the reply is to be found in the distinction between systematic education, which can only be changed by political power, and educational projects, which should be carried out with the oppressed in the process of organizing them.”<sup>4</sup>

Why this quotation? The grammar of this quotation quite precisely poses the question about processes of organization. “Them”: this is obviously all those people who, by virtue of their class status, acutely experience the injustice of the world, but who at the same time do not possess sufficient knowledge to be aware of the strategic tasks of their own emancipation. In other words, according to the old, universally accepted model, there are certain privileged external agents who develop these practices of emancipation – that’s why discussions about the figure of the educator played such an important role in the Soviet Union and Latin America. In previous times, these were people connected to God and the Church; they were followed by revolutionary parties and psychoanalysts. After the obvious downfall of these mediators, the question remains: is education possible without a teacher? Today it is the figure of the teacher/pedagogue—as the figure of repression under the sign of education — who is rightly and seriously under suspicion.

But it might make sense to dialectically reconsider this figure as someone who stays in the process of an exchange of knowledge – someone who knows something, but is ready to be in a process of learning all the time and return this knowledge transformed.

So back to our topic – I would say that the idea of a workers’ club is useless today on the level of the formation of subjectivity. For me, the shift from worker to activist is important. Historically, the worker’s identity had a marked political position, but I doubt that it does now. Today, political subjectivity is shaped inside and outside labor relations, and the position of the political subject is determined more through one’s stance as an activist.

### **From worker to activist**

A research paper was published recently in Russia by Carine Clément, the French sociologist who heads the Institute for Collective Action in Moscow. She presented the findings of her research on the new social movements in Russia, entitled “From Citizens to Activists: Social Movements in Contemporary Russia.” It was interesting that in her analysis of the processes by which the new movements are formed, she used a schema whose poles were two stances: that of the “philistine” (the pas-



Chto Delat, Rosa's Cultural House, St. Petersburg, 2015.

sive, apolitical citizen) on the one hand, and that of the activist on the other. This, in essence, is a particular variation on the subjectivity formation schema. Clément cited the testimony of her activist-respondents, who described their experience of moving towards activist stances. They talked about how they had begun to see their lives from a new perspective, as being connected to the social whole. They said that they had gained a sense of self-worth, confidence, strength, and collective solidarity, the readiness to defend their positions. The transformation of the subject causes the person to see the world from the universal perspective of the whole and gives them a sense of personal strength and fearlessness.

So for us was important to address these people first of all – but we do not want to separate them into straightforward examples of the right type of behavior from the wrong one. Instead we focus on the demand that everyone can be an activist and assert that these experiences are open to anyone. Inspiring experiences have also emerged recently in different social centers in Europe, where activists are building their own environments for self-educational activities, centered around cinema and reading and discussion spaces.

As our friends from Universidad Nomada once postulated:

“For quite a while now, a certain portmanteau word has been circulating in the Universidad Nomada’s discussions, in an attempt to sum up what we believe should be one of the results of the critical work carried out by the social movements and other post-socialist political actors. We talk about creating new mental prototypes for political action.”<sup>5</sup>

I would suggest that the same approach should be developed in relation to spatial practices. In this particular installation of the Activist Club and its further social development in the form of “Rosa’s Cultural House,” we were trying to demonstrate how these “spatial prototypes” could be realized and what they might look like bringing art out of white cube institutional situation and at the same time framing it via direct interaction with variety of politicized publics which usually stays outside of encounters with artistic practices and milieus. I hope that is one of the possible ways in which art can function today in order to fulfill the promise of its liberating power.

*Dmitry Vilensky is an artist, writer, and founding member of Chto Delat?/What is to be done?, a platform initiated in 2003 by a collective of artists, critics, philosophers, and writers with the goal of merging political theory, art, and activism. Vilensky lives and works in St. Petersburg.*

#### Endnotes

- 1 Boris Arvatov, *Art and Production: Sketch of a Proletarian Avant-garde Aesthetic (1921-1930)*, (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1972), pg. 100.
- 2 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Gabriel Rockhill tr, (New York: Continuum, 2005), pg. 24.
- 3 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the public sphere,” Simon During ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), pg. 519.
- 4 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Chapter 1, Myra Bergman Ramos tr., (New York: Continuum, 2005), pg. 10.
- 5 Universidad Nómada, “Mental Prototypes and Monster Institutions: Some Notes by Way of an Introduction,” in Alan Moore and Alan Smart, eds., *Making Room: Cultural Production in Occupied Spaces*, (Barcelona: Other Forms, The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, 2015), pg. 24.

This text is based on a previous version published by eipcp

# **The TRAF0 Boycott: Standing Up to the Privatization and Corporatization of Art and Cultural Institutions in Poland**

**Joanna Figiel & Mikołaj Iwański**

If the '90s in Eastern Europe saw a hasty implementation of neoliberal politics, then in case of Poland this period was also characterized by a shameless expression of admiration towards Margaret Thatcher. The paradigm of decentralization as the fundamental rule for organizing the public sector administration introduced in that period was, and still is, particularly damaging to the arts and cultural institutions. Continuing this logic of neoliberal politics, formerly state-run art centers and galleries are being passed over under the management of local governments, and simultaneously pushed into a never-ending conflict with the latter. These conflicts – concerning, for example, the rules specifying criteria for directorial competitions – have been intensifying since about three years ago when a new amendment was introduced to the law on cultural institutions allowing local governments to out-source management of cultural institutions to private companies selected via an open tender process – a procedure identical to that used when contracting a supplier of, say, concrete or tarmac.<sup>1</sup>

Since this new legislation, the relationship between underfunded galleries and arts centers, the arts community and local governments has been steadily deteriorating. Local councilors are now armed with a new tool for disciplining the expensive and unnecessary – in their view – art and cultural institutions. Worryingly, some of them are able to exploit the new laws to the full advantage of personal/political

agendas. The issue is further complicated by the steady stream of structural EU funding, part of which reaches the cultural sector in the form of one-off infrastructural investments.

This EU funding, the so-called 'Polish Thatcherism' insisting on privatization of every part of the public sector in the name of neoliberal ideology,<sup>2</sup> the decentralization of management of cultural institutions, and a lack of coherent legal culture all create – in the long view – a lethally destructive combination. This neoliberal approach is – first and foremost – affecting democratic procedures, fairness and transparency when it comes to management and appointments, as well as labor relations in the cultural sector, with working conditions increasingly deteriorating over the past decade.<sup>3</sup>

The best example of the devastating effects of the new regulation is the case of the TRAFOf Trafostacja Sztuki, Center for Contemporary Art in Szczecin.<sup>4</sup> Under circumstances that are to this day unclear, the Center has been passed over under the management of Baltic Contemporary – not to be mistaken with the Gateshead/Newcastle upon Tyne complex – which, to date, has had no engagement whatsoever in the arts nor in the cultural sector. In fact, the company has been created just before the tender took place. Those running it were only given weeks to prepare offers; the only offer presented against that of Baltic Contemporary has been disqualified over a formal technicality. A private company whose owner, Mikolaj Sekutowicz, has never been involved in the arts nor culture, resides in Berlin, not in Szczecin. His partner Constanze Kleiner is, however, a curator and subsequently prepared the first show under his management, and is now in charge of what has been, to date, one of the most important spaces in Szczecin.<sup>5</sup>

The two artists that publicly described and criticized the tender process<sup>6</sup> and the merits of the winning offer, Agata Zbylut i Kamil Kuskowski – both academics with links to the Fine Arts Academy in Szczecin – ended up entangled in legal proceedings that lasted a year and a half. Zbylut, from the Zachęta Sztuki Współczesnej, an arts organisation that initially came up with the idea of opening an arts centre in the current TRAFOf location, and Kuskowski, a director at the Fine Arts Academy in Szczecin, have merely written about the facts and questions concerning the tender process, yet they were accused by Baltic Contemporary's lawyers of 'black PR' against the company. The pair was initially found guilty under fair competition laws and sentenced to a fine before having their conviction overturned in a court of higher instance.<sup>7</sup>

In mid-2014, the Citizens Forum for Contemporary Arts<sup>8</sup> called artists and curators to boycott the gallery in solidarity with the accused pair and to defend freedom of speech in the context of privatization of cultural institutions, of which, sadly, TRAFOf has become a symbol of. Around 200 have joined the call, and since then, practically no Polish artists allowed their work to be shown there. While this display of solidarity can, and should, of course be seen as a success, a situation in which a major city like Szczecin remains without a serious – and adequately run – cultural space showing local artists is hardly ideal.

Even more worryingly, the mayor of Poznan has recently cited the TRAF0 tender as a positive example of managing such – de facto – outsourcing processes. The mayor, instead of ensuring a well-executed competition for a new director of the Arsenal Municipal Arts Centre in Poznan decided instead to dismantle the Centre, only to outsource its management, via a tendering process, to a private entity.

The Szczecin and Poznan events are just two examples of the worrying effects of the unacceptable state of affairs brought on by neoliberal politics and particularly this new amendment to the law allowing the emergence of the open tender public managers of cultural institutions. The authors of this regulation, presumably in their excitement at the possibilities the free market supposedly entails, did not anticipate the scale of possible conflicts of interest and demonstrated a cardinal misunderstanding of the meaning of public institutions. The ‘successful’ running of the latter cannot – and should not – ever be reduced to quantifiable ‘outputs’ nor mere ‘business efficiency’, which are unfortunately imperatives of destructive neoliberal politics developing over the last decades in Poland and most other European countries.

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*Mikołaj Iwański – PhD in economics, graduate of philosophy at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Art critic, AICA member, he carries out research into the art market in Poland. He collaborates with magazines including Magazyn Sztuki, Krytyka Polityczna and Obieg.*

### Endnotes

1 More about the new legislation on public tenders and cultural institutions is here <http://www.przetargipubliczne.pl/archiwum/art,4997,instytucja-kultury-jako-zamawiajacy.html> and here <http://www.zamowienia-publiczne.lex.pl/czytaj/-/artykul/instytucje-kulturalne-moga-nie-stosowac-przetargow>

2 Or, as Mikołaj Iwański terms it in his commentary on the recently aborted directorship competition at Poznań's Arsenal, 'Slavic Thatcherism' – see: Mikołaj Iwański, "Słowiański thatcheryzm". Komentarz do unieważnienia konkursu na dyrektora Arsenalu," available at: <http://obieg.home.pl/test/teksty/29351>

3 Such outsourcing of public services, or the so called "secondary primitive accumulation" in neoliberalism is described at length, mainly in relation to the UK situation, by Ursula Huws in her text: "Crisis as Capitalist Opportunity: New accumulation through public service commodification", [http://vuh-la-risprt.herts.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/crisis-as-capitalist-opportunity\(-4184b6a5-6d9c-44e9-944a-9430142c5bdd\).html](http://vuh-la-risprt.herts.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/crisis-as-capitalist-opportunity(-4184b6a5-6d9c-44e9-944a-9430142c5bdd).html), as well as in her book, *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age*.

4 For more about the center, see: <http://www.trafo.org/index/trafo>

5 There is a profile of Mikołaj Sekutowicz and his partner, Constanze Kleiner – formerly of Berliner Kunsthalle – in the local edition of one of the bigger Polish daily newspapers, Gazeta Wyborcza Szczecin edition here: [http://szczecin.gazeta.pl/szczecin/1,34959,12782714,Kto\\_przejal\\_szczecin-ska\\_Trafostacje\\_Sztuki\\_Poznajcie.html](http://szczecin.gazeta.pl/szczecin/1,34959,12782714,Kto_przejal_szczecin-ska_Trafostacje_Sztuki_Poznajcie.html). For more on Kleiner's dismissal from the role at Kunsthalle see for example here: <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/dieter-rosenkranz-den-eintritt-zahle-ich/1542472.html> and here:

6 Here, the pair give an interview about the process:

7 More on the case and it being eventually dismissed here: Mikołaj Iwański, "Uchylony wyrok przeciw Agacie Zbylut i Kamilowi Kuskowskiemu!," available at: <http://obieg.home.pl/test/felieton/34389>

More reactions to the outcome of the tender and the handling of the tender process here: Ewa Podgajna, Trafostacja Sztuki połowy miasta. "Moja noga tam nigdy nie postanie", available at: [http://szczecin.gazeta.pl/szczecin/1,34939,14525734,Trafostacja\\_Sztuki\\_polowy\\_miasta\\_Moja\\_noga\\_tam\\_nigdy.html](http://szczecin.gazeta.pl/szczecin/1,34939,14525734,Trafostacja_Sztuki_polowy_miasta_Moja_noga_tam_nigdy.html)

8 The Citizens' Forum of Contemporary Art is an open association of various communities, organisations and private individuals from all over Poland, that have one thing in common – their desire to accelerate the changes needed in the cultural arena, especially in relation to contemporary art. For more information on the group and its actions see my article in the previous ArtLeaks Gazette here: [https://artsleaks.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/joanna\\_figiel\\_artleaks\\_gazette\\_2.pdf](https://artsleaks.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/joanna_figiel_artleaks_gazette_2.pdf)

# Putzstrategien

**Alejandro Strus & Sonja Hornung**

*Alejandro Strus and Sonja Hornung are Masters students at the Weissensee School of Art in Berlin. This past year we were among the students pushing for changes in the fee structure of Raumstrategien (Spatial Strategies). This account details our personal perspectives on the events that unfolded.*



The bulletin board in the Berlin-Weissensee School of Art is painted black and decorated by an anonymous student.

In autumn 2014, concerns were growing again at the Berlin-Weissensee School of Art over the tuition fees charged to students in one of the six MA programs offered at the university. The semester fee of €1250 has been, since the program's inception, the source of problems for students of Raumstrategien, a small trans-disciplinary program focused on art in public space, political theory and political (artistic) practice.

The fact that we need to pay for our education may come as a surprise; tuition fees are actually quite rare in Germany, with Lower Saxony announcing last autumn as the last German state to abolish fees for public universities. In the context of Berlin, where rents and living expenses are on the rise, earning the money to cover

fees has become increasingly difficult. Some of the Raumstrategien students have scholarships or grants from the German state system – grants that are not enough for covering fees, but only living costs. Most of us, however, cover our fees through either part-time work or debt or a combination of both. As a result, it becomes difficult to strike a reasonable balance between work and study. Many of us have found ourselves negotiating with the art school administration to take breaks from our studies. It is clear to us that a tuition-free Masters, or indeed even a Masters with reduced tuition costs, would alleviate a great deal of this pressure, to the long-term benefit of the course.

Therefore, it is not just idealism, but also through personal experience that we have learned the importance of free education also laid out by the Berlin constitution, Article 21: that “Art and knowledge, research and teaching are free.”

Likewise, it is not only idealism, but also a lived sense of this pressure that led us in autumn 2014 to begin investigating our circumstances more thoroughly. Since Raumstrategien is a relatively new program born out of the educational reforms of the 1990s, we learned that our predicament is a part of a broader shift in the higher education landscape towards modularized learning focused on producing flexible entrepreneurial thinkers for a rapidly changing, knowledge-based job market.

We embarked on a process of research, touching on the complex histories of educational reform and university protest in Europe. One particular strand we found in this history begins with Reinhard Mohn’s decision to go into business, rather than to study.

### **Reinhard Mohn**

In 1947, upon returning to his hometown in Gütersloh, Germany, 25-year-old Reinhard Mohn decided not to go to university as he had once dreamt. Instead, he applied himself to rescuing his father’s business, Bertelsmann, from the rubble of World War II. This was no easy task in British-occupied Gütersloh, since Mohn senior had been an enthusiastic member of the SS and the company was one of the key publishers of Nazi propaganda.

However, over the following decades Bertelsmann rose to become the sixth-largest media corporation globally, with one hundred twelve thousand thirty-seven Bertelsmann employees worldwide and an empire rivaling that of Axel Springer or Rupert Murdoch. As early as 1977, Mohn established the Bertelsmann Foundation, a non-profit political think-tank which currently owns 77.4% of Bertelsmann. Not only was the foundation a convenient way to reduce Bertelsmann’s taxation obligations, but it also allowed Mohn to turn his influence to politics: “I had the impression that our political system back then was in a very bad shape – I still have the impression that it’s in a very bad shape – and so through the Bertelsmann

Foundation I looked for new ways for politics ... My offer for politics is to sell the people competition. Competition makes people strive harder, I have noticed, and this should be brought to politicians' attention." Through intensive and well-funded research papers, Bertelsmann-funded summits held with the political elite, and lobby work, the Bertelsmann Foundation has pushed forward principles of entrepreneurialism and meritocracy in other areas of society on a European and global level. Bertelsmann's agenda has found its way into various austerity processes, from Gerhard Schröder's Agenda 2010 to the Bologna Process.

**Bertelsmann + Life-long learning = Bologna**

One area of research that preoccupied the Bertelsmann's think-tank from the outset was higher education. In 1994, the Centre for Higher Education (CHE) was established by the Bertelsmann Foundation in Gütersloh with the intention of forging a path for tertiary education reform. CHE-funded research and lobbying was to form a basis for the Bologna Declaration (1999) and subsequent systematization of the European tertiary education into a competitive, modularized bachelor/masters



Putzstrategien poster.

model that is held accountable to privatized and expensive accreditation processes. Even earlier, the Bertelsmann Foundation, together with the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT) published a short but significant paper in 1995 entitled “Education for Europeans – Towards the Learning Society.” The paper argues that, in the shift towards the knowledge economy and a highly competitive, open and liberal market, the global viability of Europe hinges on “humane resources.” In order to remain competitive, Europe’s “humane resources” must be able to adapt quickly in a rapidly changing, information-driven economy. This is where the principle of Lifelong Learning—“‘cradle to grave’ continuous learning”—comes into play.

For the life-long learner, “adolescence” is characterized by “the obligation to learn” and motivated by externally-imposed “attainment goals and final qualifications.” “Young adults” then “enter the world of work or start their vocational training, which ends when they take up regular employment.” At this stage they learn “informal learning, self-directed learning, social, cultural, and personal skills ... [and] networking.” Systematic learning is supplied by efficient, “modularized” educational content. This allows one, during “adult life”, to “gradually build up competency profiles” both informally and through formal continued vocational training, because due to a “strong involvement in professional life and family life, time is very scarce for adults.” And the elderly? Here, “learners have greater freedom to decide for themselves whether, how and for what purpose they should take part in learning activities.” The elderly alone are promised “independence and autonomy.”

This is a profoundly political agenda. In the life-long learner can be found the new, flexible, neoliberal subject forged through an educational system that has been streamlined to suit the agenda of industrial lobbyists, among which Bertelsmann is a key player (the company even has a policy for the “lifelong learning” of its own employees). Propelled by lobbying done by the Bertelsmann Foundation and its affiliate, the CHE, not to mention by Bertelsmann’s clout in the industry-driven ERT, Lifelong Learning has since become one of the main tenets of European education policy, driven largely by the Bologna process. The result is an education system that is increasingly market-oriented.

### Germany

In the German context, the “Bolognisation” of the tertiary education system has seen the implementation of Bologna’s hallmark, a strict, two-tiered bachelor/master structure, in which learning is modularized into quantifiable units of credit points. This system replaced the former and more relaxed Diplom/Meister system more focused on self-directed, research-based outcomes in the Humboldtian tradition of autonomous learning, academic freedom and the unity of teaching and research. Locally, the implementation of Bologna in Berlin conveniently coincided with a more general “rationalization” of higher education. For example, universities are



Putzstrategien poster.

now funded according to three quota categories: the number of students enrolled, the number of students studying full-time, and the number of students who graduate. The Berlin Senate sets individualized quotas for each university, with preset funding increases if student quotas are met. Previously students could remain in university as long as was needed, but now, students are generally expected to take no longer than 5 years to complete their studies. In the context of post-crisis Europe, student intakes are on the rise, even as teaching resources are whittled down into shorter-term contracts as a result of stringent funding. Faculty departments increasingly look to private-public partnerships in order to fill the funding gap.

### **Weiterbildung**

This shift has also seen the introduction of a new category in German higher education: the *Weiterbildungsstudiengang* or postgraduate training course, which aligns exactly with the market-oriented principles of life-long learning. These courses last between one and two years and (in theory) are supposed to be entirely self-funded, making functional the educational system under the pressure of the job

market's demand for graduates. Although technically in Germany education is free across the board, fees of up to €30,000 can apply to such courses. There is no legal limit to the amount charged, which is decided by the university. Weiterbildung courses are often designed in close cooperation with companies or research foundations with the aim of providing clear career outcomes for their students (for example, the Berlin Technical University's M.Sc. in Energy-Efficient Transport Systems, which is co-funded by Volkswagen and Gasag, or the M.Sc. in Urban Development, which exists through a public-private partnership with corporate partners in El Gouna, Egypt). Weiterbildung courses in the humanities or fine arts are less common, for the obvious reason that such areas of knowledge are less commercially viable – although there are some exceptions, our own MA being one of them.

In Berlin, the number of Weiterbildungsstudiengänge are on the rise, with over 65 paid courses sprouting over the last two decades. Many of them are taught in English and appear to cater to well-moneyed international students. All universities are contractually obliged to the Berlin Senate to offer professional training courses.

### **From Raumstrategien to Putzstrategien**

Following the reunification of Berlin in 1990, Weissensee, as the former East Berlin academy of art, experienced a period of uncertainty. Its architecture program was shut down and, after a series of attempts to create a replacement program, Raumstrategien was founded as a trans-disciplinary Weiterbildung program. Alongside the school's MA in Art Therapy, Raumstrategien fulfills Weissensee's contractual obligation to offer postgraduate vocational training. However, unlike in more traditional Master courses, Raumstrategien students come from a variety of fields such as architecture, design, fine art, cultural studies and curatorial studies.

In short, Raumstrategien is something of a black sheep: it is younger than the other departments, doesn't conform to their 5-year course-structure, and its content is interdisciplinary. Structurally, Raumstrategien occupies a strange position. While on paper it is required to be a self-funded professional training program for mature students who are already in the workforce, the reality is quite different. As a new department in the university, Raumstrategien is a theory-based program with a critical focus that is not out of step with other "art as research" approaches found in British, American, or other German institutions. Without having recourse to the exact figures, we find it difficult to imagine how the MA course could ever commercially carry its own costs, as is legally stipulated.

The term "neoliberal ideology" creates a diffuse and elusive opponent. However, institutions are built, and changed, by people negotiating with one another, face-to-face. No matter how strong an emphasis Raumstrategien's course content places on institutional critique and researching new ways of making art practices public, the MA is currently a program that structurally must fit a fee-based and market-based

structure for university education. Inspired by our studies, we began to consider ways we could change the institution of Weissensee, to better integrate Raumstrategien into the university community as a whole. Why shouldn't Raumstrategien students be able to change our fee structure based on principles of self-representation and negotiation?

There had been intermittent discussions about reducing the fees almost since Raumstrategien first opened, and in the fall of 2014 some students began meeting in school and after-hours to revive the issue again in the face of dwindling student numbers, and in full appreciation of what our study program could become if it were free, like other courses in Germany.

As a first step, students met with the Vice Chancellor of the school and outlined various scenarios for reclassifying the program, or reducing fees to the lowest amount legally permitted. In response, the only viable option suggested to us was to chase after third-party private sponsorship to cover the costs of the course, an option we discussed in detail, with the conclusion that private funding would negatively affect the independence of the MA as a "free space" for autonomous artistic practice and critique. In this meeting, it was hinted that the MA might be closed if it did not carry its own costs. This form of precarity was all-too-familiar on a personal level: for international students, simply not paying the fees would entail ex-matriculation and losing their visas. So a protest in the form of a fee boycott was not an option.



Students handing out flyers around the art school.

Around the same time, a loose organisational group formed called the AkSa—Arbeitskreis Studiengebühren abschaffen [Working group to abolish student fees]. The group made contact with the student union, and we decided on a democratic, consensus-based decision-making process that would be transparently communicated to students not directly involved in the group. It was decided that there would be a formal legal approach petitioning the university's academic senate (and eventually, if necessary, the Berliner Senate) to address the tuition fees issue, alongside a strategy of awareness-raising through the publication of a manifesto and a series of protest actions.

After our initial meeting with the vice-chancellor, negotiations continued with the school administration, who met with our professors in two closed meetings. In these meetings the option of part-time study was discussed. While an improvement (an option which had previously been refused to Raumstrategien students), this measure would not reduce our fees, but simply spread the amount over a longer time period.

In frustration over our exclusion from these meetings, some students worked to spread awareness of the situation throughout the school community. The "Putzstrategien"—Cleaning Strategies/Trouble Strategies—protests saw small numbers of us dressing up in mismatched cleaning uniforms. We cleaned the school's foyer and eating area while handing fliers to classmates and staff. This was accompanied by a poster campaign which plastered copies of our tuition bills throughout the university. The Raumstrategien bulletin board in the central administrative building was also blackened-out and replaced by a single notice: "fee", with tear-off tabs labeled with the number: €1250. The cleaning action referenced the Hi-Red Center performance group, who cleaned Tokyo Subways before the 1964 Olympic Games. Significantly, it also referred to our own jobs we work to pay our fees, and the way it separates us from our peers in other departments of the school.

The decisions to escalate from meeting with the Vice Chancellor to publishing our manifesto and running a small-scale protest in the art school were not without internal controversy, and a number of Raumstrategien students expressed doubts as to how effective our protest might be, voicing reasonable frustration over undemocratic decision-making processes. Time pressures made it difficult to meet as a complete group. Being students, workers and also protesters simultaneously, by the end of the semester we were reaching our limit.

At the same time, we were warmed by the level of help and support from the student union, who provided us with invaluable support from the very beginning in all of this. We also found support among other, non-fee paying students – many of whom were horrified to find out how much we paid – and some university staff, in particular, the janitors, gatehouse workers, the workers in the school cafeteria, were overwhelmingly supportive.



Students cleaning the cafeteria.

However, the reaction from the administration of the art school to our protest was more extreme than we had envisaged. What was intended as a slow, carefully researched investigation into the political and legal background of our situation – a means to open a conversation with the art school about a taboo topic – escalated very quickly (we were all surprised at how quickly) into a conflict-laden relationship with the art school administration, despite the fact that, aside from one meeting, there was no direct communication between the administration and the students as a group. Pressure was directed, instead, towards our professors, who had stood by – but were by no means responsible for – our actions. It was at this point that we decided to stop our protest, at least temporarily. Very recent developments at Berlin's Universität der Künste, where an affiliated group of students (Loose Grip) performed a boycott, have sparked shared discussions over the economization of learning in Berlin.

## Conclusions

The discussion over Raumstrategien, and the Weiterbildungsstudiengang programs in general, comes at a time where austere education funding policies coincide with negotiations over the societal function of universities. The question of whether higher-education should provide a space for research and artwork, or to a job-training role is a particularly acute one for art schools. Here, attempts to restructure ter-

tiary education institutions to suit industry-designed standards fail on several levels. Practically, the Bologna credit system is applied, and then circumvented when it becomes untenable to fit certain subjects – for example, an art project that, organically, stretches over two-and-a half semesters – into a scheduled system of modularized learning. While it is helpful to enhance international mobility for students, this goal, the main “selling-point” of the Bologna reforms, hardly seems to justify the wholesale destruction of older learning structures that were more focused on self-directed learning and solid student–professor relationships. On a moral level, the proliferation of supposedly self-funding study programs such as the *Weiterbildungsstudiengang* are also problematic, as they circumvent the established democratic support for free education, and tap into a familiar North American phenomenon: the use of “wealthy” foreign students as a revenue stream on the backs (and reputations) of public institutions. If the first criteria for acceptance into a course of study is income, the integrity of the entire education system as a whole is affected.

Our protest, by no means perfectly executed, also had far from perfect results. Although the option of part-time study will now be available in the coming semester – a definite improvement and a direct result of the protest – we still, ultimately, pay the same amount of money for our studies. On the one hand, our course is still mis-categorized as a “professionalization” degree that will –realistically – neither carry its own costs nor produce bright-eyed young professionals eager to fill the next gap in the job market. On the other hand, the ideal of free education for *Raumstrategien* students still remains totally out of the question. Our relationship with the administration of the art school, already burdened by the usual problems that come hand-in-hand with a course consisting of 50% international students (visa issues, language problems, financial problems, late fee payments due to mismatching funding cycles, etc.) has not improved since the protests, the result of honest misunderstanding, as well as very genuine financial pressures within the art school itself.

Why was our protest so quickly shut down? We learned that we are caught in a kind of pincer movement born out of a broader context. From below, the realities of “life-long learning” are setting in across Europe, as rising job precarity and living costs as a result of austerity measures and the shift to a knowledge-based economy have led to a particularly unstable existence for creative workers, leading to a job landscape where re-skilling is essential for survival. This is a pressure we experience on a personal and a generational level. On a structural level, our art school is effected by the rationalization of higher education from free, self-directed learning based on the principle of autonomous thought, to a modularized, fractured professionalization system coinciding with an efficiency-oriented approach to funding based on quantities of students, rather than quality of teaching and learning. Importantly, both the students of *Raumstrategien*, the course itself, and the leadership of *Weisensee* actively resist these pressures (in 2013, the school even negotiated to retain the old *Diplom/Meisterschule* system for the painting and sculpture departments,

in defiance of the Bologna reform model). But – we take it on trust – where money is short, there are no easy solutions.

Nonetheless, Raumstrategien enjoyed a certain level of visibility throughout this period. Additionally, we developed a sensibility for the shifting social roles of universities in Germany, the pressures of the market, and our positioning in this rubric. This knowledge is now a part of our program, and we continue to work with it. The research, and even the conflict-laden process behind the protests, brought us together as a group, and laid the groundwork for an exhibition entitled “Pay-Off” that took place this summer in Weissensee’s end-of-year show. Most importantly, together, we now have a very clear understanding of what exactly we are resisting.

#### **Endnotes**

1 Bertelsmann in an interview, translated by the authors.

2 See <http://www.bertelsmannkritik.de> (only available in German)

3 See “Strategy for Lifelong Learning in the Federal Republic of Germany,” available online: <http://www.blk-bonn.de/papers/volume115-english.pdf>



Monotremu: "In this photo-performance we tried to illustrate the waiting time between a show or an exhibition that we were part of, and the moment we are remunerated for. But more generally is about the type of relations (and the bonds) we feel we are having with the art and cultural institutions, both from Romania as abroad."

# Solidarity: Making it Happen

**Xandra Popescu**

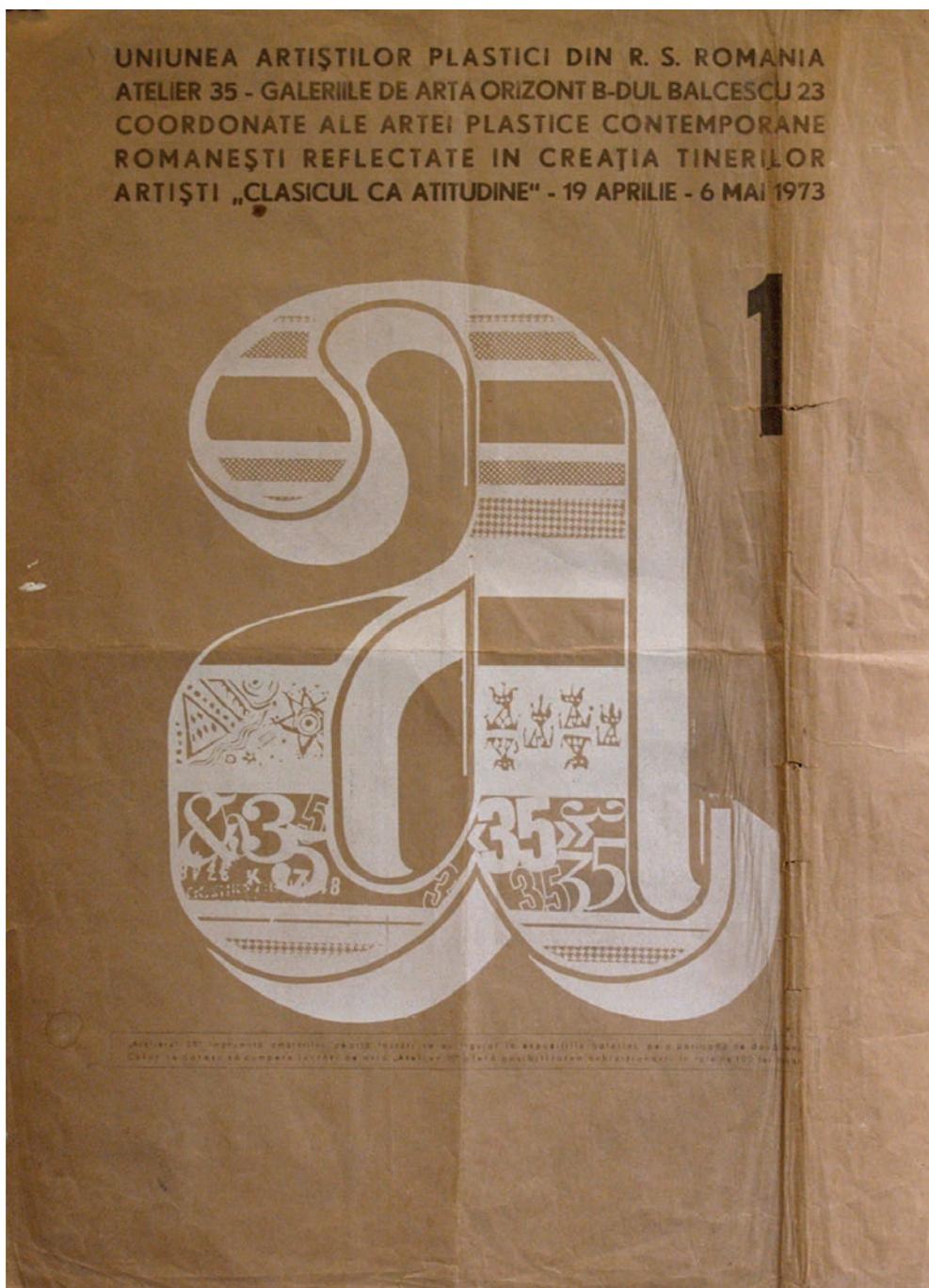
Imagine a world without an art market. A world in which the state is the sole art commissioner. A world in which the artists are unionized. Union Memberships come with a set of concrete advantages: having an atelier, discounts for art supplies and artist residencies in picturesque spots at the seaside or in the mountains. One could say that this is what the Artist's Union provided in Socialist Romania. That would be one version of the story. Others would remind us that all of these things came at a high price: the price of isolation. Artists could seldom go abroad. Career wise virtually none of them had access to the international art scene. Every exhibition was subject to censorship and artists were often denounced with or without grounds. What sort of political role could artists assume in such circumstances? The best case scenario they could aim for was creating a space of resistance.

Paradoxically enough, in Socialist times entering the Artists Union was prestigious. Many were knocking at the door; few entered. In order to keep younger artists at bay, enlightened members of the Union came up with the concept of Atelier 35 a network of project spaces in the big cities of Romania dedicated to artists up to the age of 35 – which would have been considered back in the days the conventional upper limit of youth. Atelier 35 functioned as a laboratory for experimentation and at the same time a waiting room for the Artists Union. But soon the waiting room became more interesting than the room. After the fall of Ceaușescu regime, the role of the Artists Union changed and young artists no longer rushed to join the Union. Loosing this point of reference the role of Atelier 35 also remained unclear, but remained inscribed somewhere along the vague lines of youth, experimentation, and enthusiasm.



The Logo of Atelier 35 designed by artist Ion Grigorescu

In the beginning of 2015, following the controversy around the possible evacuation of Atelier 35 in favor of the organizers of Bucharest Biennale, the Romanian Artists Union has renewed its request towards young artists to form a new department within its structures titled Atelier 35. Their reason: the Union needs enthusiastic and active young people capable of moving things forward and “absorbing Euro-pean funding.” But perhaps by increasing the number of memberships, the



The Logo of Atelier 35 designed by artist Ion Grigorescu

unions could continue to ensure social benefits for its members. Currently the Artists Un-ion is funded through the memberships but also through the so-called stamp - a two percent tax on every work of art galleries sell. Part of the quota of memberships goes to the Union and part of it stays with the departments and is used for the or-ganization of exhibitions and events. The Union is structured into departments ac-cording to the criteria of medium: textiles, graphics, metal, ceram-

ics, art critique, restoration, etc.). But what would be the medium of the department titled Atelier 35? Well, youth itself, apparently. Artists entering Atelier 35 would become mem-bers of the Union in their full right and obligation. But why wouldn't young artists join the medium-specific departments of the Union directly? For one thing, because they may find such divisions outdated and secondly perhaps because through its activity, Atelier 35 has become representative for contemporary artistic practices. Indeed, over the last few years, Larisa Crunțeanu, Alice Gancevici and I have un-wittingly contributed to the "rebranding" of Atelier 35 as the administration of the Artists Union puts it.



A stamp of Atelier 35 dating back to Communist Times



An 80's logo of Atelier 35

Along with several collaborators and friends, Larisa and I who currently power At-elier 35, have albeit reluctantly, responded to the Union's call to form such a new department within the organization. The reasons varied from pragmatic ones such as: pensions and social protection for artists (and the Artists Union has already got such mechanisms in place) to the old adage: "we can bring the change from inside" or the optimistic idea of artistic solidarity. For some, there was also the hope and claim to the Union's resources, as it still disposes of many studios and exhibition spaces.

A group of around 10 to 20 people started gathering regularly and discussing what should be the principles of such a structure. Collective making is not easy. Many decisions are still to be taken: should this group be a small circuit of like minded people who would lobby for the rights of artists by key institutions or rather a "catch all" kind of structure based on the lowest common denominator? Should decisions be taken by voting or rather by constructing consensus? Should this structure inside the Union have a patrimony of its own for organizing exhibitions and events? Should there exist aesthetic criteria for entering this structure or not?

For me the most important question is what should be the relationship between art workers? What is the element that binds us together? Is it our shared aspirations, our precarity or our youth?

I have asked three women artists with a great deal of experience in self-organization to answer the following question. What would a union you would like to be part of look like? I hoped that such exercises of wishful thinking could create a climate for political friendship.



An 90's logo of Atelier 35

### Veda Popovici

Imagining communitarian solutions is one of my favorite pastimes. But, unlike many such dreams that are faraway utopias of communal organizing, a Union of the Cultural Workers could be a very tangible and realistic imagining. Routed in the historical tradition of unionizing and workers organizing, such a union should be a response to the current siege upon the social rights of the workers by late capitalism. However, I must state that I am not really a big fan of unions – as they look nowadays, mostly sell-outs – my impression is that it's mostly an outdated strategy of struggle. With this tension in mind, I can still think of two major arguments in support for a union. Firstly, it could be a strategic solution, for the contemporary Bucharest and Romania. Given the specific conditions of where, with whom and in what conditions my labor is conducted, this could really work. The Romanian context is characterized by a continuous and assiduous dismantling of all social rights of cultural workers gained through decades of struggles. Mostly, this is due to the violent intrusion of capitalism in the 90s. A Union of today could protect the little that remains and begin the retrieval of what has been lost. Which brings me to the second argument: such a union would also be a stable platform for organizing and creating political discourses in the realm of contemporary art. It would be informed and connected to international networks and organizations for cultural workers rights such as: similar unions in Eastern Europe, collectives such as W.A.G.E., Carrots Workers Brigade or ArtLeaks. With such international openness, this Union could constitute the formal social frame for creating new discourses and tactics of struggle, that would be more radical and more adapted to current global conditions of empire and capital.

*Veda Popovici works as an artist, theoretician and activist mostly in a dilettante manner. Currently, she is a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Arts in Bucharest with a research on nationalism and national identity in Romanian art of the 70s and 80s.*

### Delia Popa

My father was a designer-architect, a lecturer at the “Nicolae Grigorescu” Art Institute, Bucharest and a member of the Artists Union until 1990 when he died. I grew up spending summer holidays at the Casa de creație [House for Creating] in Constanța, at the Black Sea, one of the residency spaces for members of the Artists Union. (The Union was considered an NGO of public utility; it obtained a complementary pension of 50% for members who already had a pension, and had the potential for obtaining other benefits for artists. On the other hand, art exhibited in the Union spaces has not gained international exposure and recognition and hasn't generated any visible artistic group before 1989.) My sister and I loved that house (and still do) and I assume that spending all this time with artists and their children, since I was 4 and into my adolescence, played a part in choosing to become an artist and study painting at the National University of Arts Bucharest.

There I learned a bit about art, philosophy and anthropology, how to draw and paint, but I also learned that almost all professors had a beard, no female painter has taught in the Painting Department, and that the U.A.P. was run by the same people (men) as the school. Beyond the lack of feeling that I belonged to this group, I also felt a sense of stagnation, in the department and in the art scene of Bucharest. As I was leaving for London, to find movement and more knowledge, the art scene was starting to move here as well.

But was the Union moving? Was it still a place which artists aspired to enter, to gain artistic status and group representation as it has been during the Ceaușescu regime? According to my uncle, Vlad Calboreanu, also a designer-architect and active member of the Union, in the last 25 years this organization has been a mixture of a union and a promoter of art, without really succeeding in any of the two endeavors.

Since I returned from my journey abroad in 2008, I have been interested in triggering a group of like-minded individuals around feminist ideas in Bucharest, and now I feel this group is possible with the purpose of strengthening the work of the Union, with feminist ideas. In my opinion the main thing is to separate the promotion of art from the work for the union.

*Delia Popa is a visual artist and art educator from Bucharest. Her practice makes use of feminist theory and practice re-contextualized in the Romanian environment by means of performance, video, drawing, and painting. She studied fine art in Bucharest, London, and Chicago. In 2014 she defended her thesis on Arts Management in Contemporary Art in Romania at ULBS Sibiu. In 2013 she co-founded ArtCrowd—artists in education, an arts education organization which aims to develop life skills such as critical thinking, creative thinking and collaborative skills in children and youth.*

### **Ioana Cojocaru**

Considering the present socio-economic situation in Europe and the repercussions that debt, austerity regulations, and precarious working conditions have on workers' life at large, I would say that the artists' union to whose platform I would choose to subscribe should be one that works actively with formulating and sustaining different modes of organization than the top down structures ruled by a neoliberal capitalist logic. It should be generated by people who acknowledge the necessity of counteracting the alienation that occurs with a low, insecure or non existing wage, and the acceleration in demand for rapid production. It should enable its members to slow down and question the means of production, the hierarchies of knowledge, and the divisions of labor embedded in the production of an artwork, as all these processes and actions are integral to the meaning of the piece. It should offer legal advice and professional support to the ones who raise uncomfortable questions and demand transparency in decision making when entering or being hired by an art institution. It should have policies that help regulating the working conditions

that art institutions offer its employees, and it should work actively with a gender agenda in order to level the existing inequalities and eliminate the discrimination faced by women artists. It should encourage its members to become political subjects rather than entrepreneurs answering to the market demand. It should work close to the art academies and lobby for collective organization in which cooperation, solidarity, open source, non market economies, and the commons are replacing the words that have entered the arts from the lean production vocabulary, and are now forming the subjectivity of young artists, leaving them with very little space to imagine otherwise. This syndicate could engage in larger political debates that could be beneficial for artists, one being lobbying for a guaranteed basic income. Parallel with this, it could build alliances with all the other existing progressive trade unions being active at the time in order to influence the political climate.

*Ioana Cojocariu is a visual artist who currently lives in Malmö, Sweden. She is presently engaged with the formation of a self-organized group that uses video documentation and auto-ethnography as a re-search practice. The intention of initiating this platform of communication and knowledge production that is not tied to a specific cultural institution, but which can be seen as an autonomous formation with an agency, came out of necessity. This type of collective re-search focuses of intersubjectivity and interrogates the modes of organization and productions of an artwork. It engages into a constant process of re-evaluation and positions itself critically in relation to the notion of ownership.*

# HABEN UND BRAUCHEN (to Have and to Need) STATEMENT

at Artist Organisations International at HAU Theater  
Berlin, January 11, 2015

Sonja Augart, Tatjana Fell, Alice Münch, Ina Wudtke and Inga Zimprich formed a temporary working group to represent Haben und Brauchen<sup>1</sup> (to Have and to Need) at the Artist Organizations International conference, which took place at HAU, a theatre in Berlin in January 2015.<sup>2</sup> We wrote this statement to voice our anger at a curated and costly symposium, which pretended to be an attempt at organising an international movement of solidarity amongst artists. We read our statement from amidst the audience.<sup>3</sup>



Haben und Brauchen, sound check, 2015. Photo credit: Arne Sattler

*Spoken by Sonja*

1.000 artists and cultural producers in Berlin signed an open letter.<sup>4</sup> This was the starting point of to Have and to Need in January, 2011.

*Spoken by Alice: I was one of these artists.*

*Spoken by Sonja*

With this letter to Have and to Need positioned itself against the exhibition project 'Based in Berlin' which was initiated by the former mayor Wowereit. To Have and to Need protested against the instrumentalization of artists for neoliberal image policy and city marketing. To Have and to Need demands cultural policy that adequately responds to the specific needs of the thousands of artists living and working in this city and their institutions.



Haben und Brauchen, performing the statement a HAU, 2015. Photo credit: Arne Sattler

Since then to Have and to Need functions as an independent platform for political and cultural debate. To Have and to Need tries to generate an open structure of participation. Currently about 20 people are actively engaged – they vary according to the issues and questions at stake. As to Have and to Need we reflect on the complex shifts and changes of living- and working conditions for artists and cultural producers in Berlin. At the moment we're working on three main topics, these are labour, city space and concepts of art.

***Spoken by Ina: I am one of these artists.***

***Spoken by Inga***

Of all artists only five percent can make a living of their work. I can't. I was tired living from one precarious project to the next which we eventually often do without even paying ourselves. Most of us work in side-jobs, often being assistants to other artists, working in galleries or building up exhibitions and fairs. Many of us are supported by our partners, families, friends, or live off the unemployment office with all the pressure that comes with it. Still, though this affects most of us, it is hard to openly address our working realities within the art world. Just like most other sectors of society the art field is based solely on competition and on the fact that only very few of us can make it. And even now as I speak we compete. We're competing for the few resources, for contacts, opportunities, for visibility and an occasional fee like the one today that we had to split by five.

Even if we demand obligatory artists fees for publicly funded exhibitions, these demands cover only a tiny fraction of what artistic labor and cultural work really involves. If I'd add up all the time that goes into researching, analyzing, planning, organizing and producing work, I don't even want to think about what I'm actually paid per hour. Many of us also do political work as artists, care for our contexts, sit in endless meetings, run self-organized spaces.

We stand behind the demands of W.A.G.E. for Work, Carrotworkers' Collective, Precarious Workers Brigade, the BBK Berlin and other initiatives. We need to understand that changing our situation as cultural workers requires commitment, effort and persistence.

***Spoken by Ina***

The 1990s surplus of space which made the establishment of numerous low cost project spaces, studios and rental flats possible has turned into a shortage of space today. Artists, cultural producers, welfare recipients and other precarious workers are harassed and evicted by upscale real estate projects and privatization of neighborhoods.

***Spoken by Sonja: I am one of them.***

***Spoken by Ina***

As a consequence of growing commercial infrastructure, private galleries, art initiatives and artists have played their role in the process of expanding the gentrification throughout the city.

***Spoken by Tatjana: I am one of them.***

***Spoken by Ina***

Parallel to this development we witness a construction of national history in the city center. Reactionary historic and spatial lines are reinstalled and cemented. It is planned to exhibit German, Prussian colonial heritage unquestioned in the middle of Berlin, while contemporary art is employed to rehabilitate this looted art from ethnographic collections.

In the future scenarios developed by the City Senate, in 2030 the self-organized, participatory, artistic practices generated during the Berlin of the 90s, will be entirely replaced by creative industries.

***Spoken by Alice***

An event named Artist Organizations International alludes to the Communist Workers International and the International Workers Movement. This event today pretends to create a solidarity of art workers internationally. It seems like an attempt at organizing collectively to fight for better working conditions on an international level.

But the leading protagonists are missing: Where are labor unions, artist unions, FAU, ArtLeaks, W.A.G.E. for work, Carrotworkers' Collective and other groups that aim to empower precarious workers? Does an event that assembles a small number of art projects want to distance itself from those real efforts to unite? How can we prevent that our participation in this event devaluates the work of countless initiatives that do practical political work? How can we value the hard and invisible labour to organize ourselves?

(pause)

***Spoken by all: We came as a group of five persons.***

***Spoken by Tatjana***

We who are here today stand for the questions which we share within to Have and to Need. To Have and to Need as well speaks with many voices. At the same time we address our general questions related to the possibility to organize internationally.

***Spoken by all: We came as five women.***

***Spoken by Tatjana***

As a matter of fact the art-field contains a high percentage of women. The main share of structural care-taking, reproductive work and invisible labor is done by women. The work of women is often underpaid, payed unequally or not payed at all. We find women sitting in meetings – writing protocols, working from home under precarious conditions, forming the backbone of every project. For many of us, our middle-class family background allows us to work in this precarious field.

*Spoken by all: We came as a group representing a group.*

*Spoken by Tatjana*

Our wish to work equally in groups implicates the resistance to a logic of selection, a selective determination of single representatives, like the most sovereign person, the most eloquent speaker, the most well-known person, the male offensive speaker. What degree of trust and reliance do we need to encourage each other? Which needs do we want to articulate publicly? How can we negotiate within our group how to follow invitations sent out to single individuals? How can we pled to work as a group in contexts like this? Who decides who will be a representative?



Haben und Brauchen, performing at HAU, 2015. Photo credit: Arne Sattler

*Spoken by Inga*

You have purchased a ticket for 33€ to watch the performance of political art initiatives throughout three days. What's missing for you? What's missing for us? What do we gain by re-staging our work in a theatre? Who takes the credit for our efforts to organize and unionize? Who will put his name under our work?

Creating solidarity would mean for us an equal right for all to attend and for all to speak.

Creating solidarity would mean creating a learning situation, a situation in which we all listen to each other.

Creating solidarity would mean for us that we meet in self-organized spaces and in places without curatorial invitation policy.

If we want to create solidarity, the entrance to our meetings is free.

If we want to create solidarity we facilitate what makes participation possible: translation, accommodation, joint meals, child-care and we try to reach beyond our networks.

Creating solidarity would mean for us to acknowledge all forms of labor that each event requires: the care work in our social contexts, the maintenance work for spaces and infrastructures as well as organizational work that brings us here.

Creating solidarity on an international level means for us to abolish event-based productions like this one and to acknowledge existing local infrastructures instead. It means to familiarize ourselves with the work that other local initiatives already do, also outside the art field.

Creating solidarity would mean for us to learn from activists and unionists how to rethink our practices and to rework our field in order to establish more fair forms of working together.

The long-term, tedious and unspectacular labor of creating solidarity with each other takes place outside the theater and outside of spaces that are foremost geared at presentation.

*Haben und Brauchen [to Have and to Need] is an informal platform for discussion and action founded in 2011. It advocates the recognition and preservation of a self-organised artistic practice that has grown out of the specific historical conditions in Berlin. Haben und Brauchen's manifesto goes beyond individual artists' interests and makes connections to debates around the commons, precarious economy, urban development and housing policy as well as the shifting notions of labour in contemporary society.*

**Endnotes**

1 A recording of this statement can be found at <https://vimeo.com/118486462> (from min. 23 on).

2 To Have and to Need is an open platform for discussion of cultural policy in Berlin.

<https://www.habenundbrauchen.de>

3 Artist Organisations International has been an event curated by Florian Malzacher, Jonas Staal, Joanna Warsza at HAU (Hebbel Am Ufer), Berlin and supported by the Hauptstadtkulturfonds with 100.000€ <https://www.artistorganisationsinternational.org>

4 Haben und Brauchen's initial public letter, published to protest against the exhibition project, can be found here: <http://www.habenundbrauchen.de/en/category/haben-und-brauchen/1-open-letter>

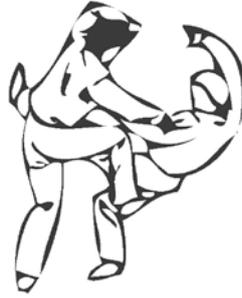


get a regular job

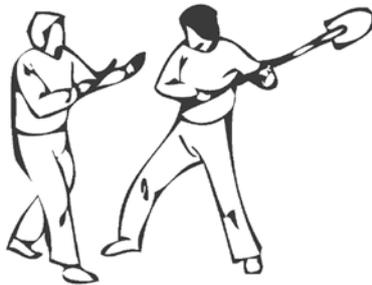
## How can an artist fight down precarity?



to persist on  
relatives' money



to objectify it  
in one's art



to become  
commercially successful



to put up  
with it



violence is impotence

## And what about violence?



we are all oppressors and victims at the same time – violence is our vital necessity!



violence can be non-violent like Gandhi's



I'm an artist. I only allow violence that I cause to me



everything within legal boundaries is not violence

# On Direct Action: An Address to Cultural Workers

## Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.)

*What time is it on the clock of the world?* - Grace Lee Boggs

We amplify a cry reverberating across the globe. From Istanbul and Sao Paulo to New York and London, the proliferation of direct actions is disrupting business as usual at elite cultural institutions: #Black Lives Matter at the Museum of Natural History, climate protests at the Tate Modern and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, collective pressure for boycott at Haifa's Technion, worker solidarity disruptions at the Guggenheim Museum NYC, to name only a few.

We now see a diversity of tactics being employed. At times, uninvited assemblies inside museums are announced. At other times the unexpected occurs, unheralded. Actions take aim at a range of targets: labor exploitation, white supremacy, the capture of public space, climate injustice, gentrification, police violence, Israeli apartheid, rape and sexual assault, and more. They are beautifully disruptive within their own arenas of concern. But these concerns are also connected.

We know that by generating narratives in the media, actions can either have deeply transformative potential, or they can reinforce existing norms and power relations. They can either accept the limits of a given context—and implicitly affirm them—or they can change the nature of that context altogether.

We believe that a shift is beginning to occur.



G.U.L.F., "Meet Workers' Demands Now!", G.U.L.F.'s banner released from the Guggenheim's rotunda on the MayDay 2015, Photo credit: Margaret Singer

We are living in times dominated by a global ultra-luxury economy. This economy masks the theft of public space, the dispossession of citizens' rights, the abuse of workers, the ruthless extraction of debt revenue, and the propagation of seeds of more racism and violence everywhere. We act to strike the global ultraluxury economy in the interests of making a new space of imagination, one that builds power with people and facilitates there-arrangement of our own desires in the struggle for justice and freedom.

We are the Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.). Our name aggressively reflects back to the actually existing art world its true nature: a spectacular subsystem of global capitalism revolving around the display, consumption, and financialization of cultural objects for the benefit of a tiny fraction of humanity, namely, the 1%.

We are cultural workers. We are students, teachers, thinkers, makers, painters, writers, musicians, and more. We recognize and use our privilege to speak out but must always be wary of reproducing the privilege of our location. We work with the imagination and the senses, with hearts and minds, with bodies and voices.



G.U.L.F., "Meet Workers' Demands Now!", G.U.L.F.'s banner released from the Guggenheim's rotunda on the MayDay 2015, Photo credit: Margaret Singer

We recognize that our work, our creativity, and our potential are channeled into the operations and legitimization of the system. We work—often precariously—as both exploiters and exploited, but we do not cynically resign ourselves to this morbid status quo. We will not allow our songs to become ashes, or our dreams to become nightmares. We see our proximity to the system as an opportunity to strike it with precision, recognizing that the stakes far exceed the discourses and institutions of art as we know them.

We are living, working, and creating in an expanded field of empire. This field is marked by mortal crises—crises of finance resulting in gaping inequality, of climate, of dispossession and displacement, of poverty and neocolonialism in all its forms, of state violence and creeping fascism, and always of patriarchy. But this field is also traversed by freedom struggles, from the striking workers in Abu Dhabi and Dubai to the insurgents in Palestine, Ferguson, Athens, and beyond. G.U.L.F. itself emerged, in part, from the occupation of Wall Street. There, inspired by uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Greece, and Spain, we bypassed the institutions of a corrupted representative democracy. We put our bodies directly on the line at the symbolic

doorstep of global capital. Wall Street is an abstract space, everywhere and nowhere at once. By de-occupying it, we created space for collective powers to surge forth for struggles to connect with one another. Walking together, we have asked questions. How do we live? What is freedom? What does solidarity look like? What role can art play?

We target both global systems and local conditions at once. G.U.L.F. names an overarching system, but it also evokes a specific location which exemplifies that system in its most spectacular form: the oil sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf. These states are the supreme recreational playground for the global 1%. Artistic and educational institutions from New York to Paris have eagerly contributed their brands to the development of the de luxecity scapes of the Emirates. We see monuments to “culture” woven into a monstrous assemblage of fossil fuels, financial power, and imperial geopolitics. Holding up the pyramid, bearing the weight of the entire edifice, are the legions of workers from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and most recently, Ghana and Nigeria, who seek dignity and a better future for their families. They are drawn to the Gulf by economic precariousness in their home countries, and often end up bonded to their work through debt. Many of these workers have been at the forefront of struggles for wages and labor reforms that challenge the very terms of Gulf petro-capitalism, itself embedded in global flows of capital and labor. The global cultural brands setting up in Abu Dhabi—Guggenheim, the Louvre, the British Museum, NYU—accept zero responsibility. They insist that the grievances of the workers should be addressed to the government, to the subcontractors, to the middlemen, to the “sending country,” but never to the disinterested heights of the art institutions themselves, which possess a leverage they refuse to acknowledge.

What can be done? Our partners in the Gulf Labor Coalition first brought these conditions of life, work, and debt to public attention. They called for an artists boycott of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi in particular, demanding that certain conditions on the Island of Happiness be met. Trips have been taken to labor camp and construction zones in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, reports have been written, extensive meetings have been convened. G.U.L.F. brought a new element to this arsenal: artistic direct actions targeting the flagship Guggenheim in New York, designed to incite solidarity, not charity. We have made unsolicited alterations to the building, to the spectator environment, and to the internal protocols of the museum itself, making it into a temporary zone of the marvelous while drawing connections between speculative real estate booms and busts from Manhattan to Abu Dhabi. Banners were dropped, propaganda flung like confetti from the heights of the famous spiral; voices thundered and echoed throughout the rotunda, police were called in to secure the museum as it shut down. We have disfigured the Guggenheim’s corporate brand and magnified the pressure on the museum’s trustees to accept responsibility for the human misery at the bottom of the subcontracting chain. When we act in New York—the capital of the global art world and global media

alike—we perform on an outsized stage, and can amplify many voices, especially those that go unheard on Saadiyat Island. How do we understand the connection between the struggles of the UAE’s migrant workers and our own struggles? Why do we regard the liberation of these migrant workers as a precondition of our own liberation? We do not imagine the workers as victims to be saved, but rather as fellow human beings whose freedom is bound up with our own. We have connected with their plight because our own dignity depends on it. Our liberation is either collective or it is nonexistent, so we assail the Guggenheim in New York because it is our gateway into a larger struggle. When we proclaim solidarity, we do not ignore very real differentials of conditions, temporalities, experiences, power, and privilege between ourselves and the migrant workers. We hold onto the specificities of struggle because we understand that history is more awesome than good will. We will not be solidarity tourists. Spectacular actions are necessary yet insufficient on their own. How do we sustain solidarity?

We imagine escalation—at the Guggenheim and beyond. The Guggenheim has been for us an urgent target in its own right. But it has also been a testing ground, a laboratory of learning, training in the practice of freedom, with ramifications far beyond the museum itself. Even if the Guggenheim Foundation trustees accede to the demands of the Gulf Labor Coalition and take independent action to protect the rights of workers—or even to abolish their debts—our work will not be over. Saadiyat Island will still stand as a challenge and a target, along with every other cultural stockpile designed to embellish the lives of the ultra-luxury elite at the expense of the lives of the great majority—especially the lives of black and brown people, who are systemically devalued and rendered disposable under carceral neoliberalism. The workings of the art world have long been bound up with the fine art of gentrification—the by now formulaic intertwining of culture-driven development, realty speculation, and enclave policing that disciplines and displace slower-income populations from urban neighborhoods. On Saadiyat Island, we see these components in a slightly different, but fundamentally related, combination—brown bodies in accommodations that resemble detention camps, toiling under debt bondage and brutal law enforcement to build a real estate paradise for a light-skinned over class.

We who believe in freedom cannot rest. The ultra-luxury economy is deeply racialized, locally and globally. In the Gulf, Americans and Europeans doing business are called expats, whereas people constructing and maintaining these surreal cities in the desert are called migrant workers. Actions within and against this economy must make the struggle against racism and white supremacy as an essential component. This extends to the occupation, exploitation, and ethnic cleansing characteristic of Israeli policy—indeed, a global cultural boycott of institutions connected to Israeli apartheid is well within our reach. Boycotts, strikes, pickets, die-ins, occupations, web hacks, media hijacks... whatever the combination of tactics, our actions are at once oppositional and abundantly creative. As we disrupt and refuse the role that art now plays in the normal functioning of a global system that prop-

agates racism and inequality in its shadows, we make space for something new to come into the world. The heart of this new culture is solidarity and human dignity. From acting we learn anew way of thinking. Let each action be an opportunity to test, toun learn, and to train in the practice of freedom. Let us expand our analysis, deepen our struggles, and reimagine together what art can be as a force of collective liberation and international solidarity.

*G.U.L.F. Labor is coalition of international artists working to ensure that migrant worker rights are protected during the construction of museums on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi.*

This text was previously publish in the e-flux journal:  
<http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/authors/gulf-labor/>

# When Politics Becomes Form. The Venice Biennale, 2015

Ivor Stodolsky

On Karl Marx's birthday this year, a six-month public reading of *Das Kapital* was initiated not far from a video-installation documenting the thoughts of two leading Marxists of our time – Stuart Hall and David Harvey. On the same day, the same artist who initiated these politically-charged projects launched a preview of a new film. It features a *Spirit of Ecstasy* Rolls-Royce car and was commissioned by this luxury brand whose eponymous sister corporation was recently the 16th largest defense contractor in the world.<sup>1</sup> Welcome to the Venice Biennale where, as the wisdom of Leonard Cohen has it, “everybody knows.” Even critical reviews register paradoxes such as these with rarely more than a passing remark.

But, halt! – even if only for the fashionistas. Wasn't Cohen's *bon-mot passé* long ago – a relic of *fin-de-siècle* “po-mo”?<sup>2</sup> This laissez-faire cynicism does not do justice to a new generation of re-engaged art and politics of the moment. Why is Okwui Enwezor, who as its curator has filled this year's Biennale chocker-block with political art, so “tone deaf” as one journalist put it, as not to feel even the slightest burning in the ears at such blatant contradictions?<sup>3</sup>

In 1969, shortly after the uprisings of 1968, Harald Szeemann curated his (in)famous “When Attitude Becomes Form”. Its radical attitude created such an artistic rupture of form, and an equally horrified reaction from the establishment, that after-shocks were felt for years to come. The exhibition was shut down, despite its sponsorship by Philip Morris Cigarettes, and Szeemann resigned. Drawing parallels, Okwui Enwezor has curated what is slated as a highly political show in the midst of uprisings which stretch from Tahrir Square to Thessaloniki.

Contrary to Szeemann, however, Enwezor is the darling of the establishment. The direction is reversed: politics seems on its way to becoming *mere* form.

For some at the Venice preview, that was not enough. When radical art and political theory can be hyper-commodified – as the fetishistic facsimile of near forty-pages of *Das Kapital* in the Biennale’s €85 catalogue amply demonstrates – direct action seems one of the last possible ways, in such “spectacular” contexts, to make uncompromisingly clear this difference between politics and its mere form. At least this was the rationale of Perpetuum Mobile, the curatorial vehicle run by Marita Muukkonen and myself.

Although having come to Venice not to work, but to observe for the first time in many years, we were fast drawn into the heart of an operation initiated by friends and colleagues from the Gulf Labor Coalition based in New York and the local activist space S.a.L.E. Docks, along with many friends and fellow-travelers.

The task: **occupy the Venice Guggenheim**. Hashtag: **#GuggOccupied**.

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Preparations for the #GuggOccupied action: Noah Fischer (G.U.L.F.), Marita Muukkonen (Perpetuum Mobile), Andrew Ross (Gulf Labor), Ivor Stodolsky (Perpetuum Mobile), Amin Husain (G.U.L.F.). Banner painted by Joulia Strauss. May 2015. Photo credit: Perpetuum Mobile

The use of what amounts to bonded labour in building the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is at the core of the concerns of Gulf Labor, a growing coalition of engaged artists, researchers and activists with links to international art and labour associations. Its origins overlap and were inspired by the “Who’s Building NYU Abu Dhabi?” campaign, initiated by professors and students of New York University. The new NYU campus – as well as a new branch of the Louvre, among many other infrastructure projects in the UAE and the wider region – is being built under the same exploitative labour regime, which often goes under the name of the “Kafala System”.<sup>4</sup>

In the US, awareness of the harsh abuses of the labour regime in the UAE date back to at least 2006, when a Human Rights Watch report on the topic was published.<sup>5</sup> This report was given wide distribution by initiators of the NYU campaign, such as such as the sociologist Andrew Ross, gradually leading to a wider movement.<sup>6</sup> The issues raised centre on working conditions and the manner in which migrant labourers are tricked into a system whereby their first years in Abu Dhabi amount to forced and nearly unpaid labour. With the cost of travel to the UAE covered by the building companies up-front, the workers are usually deprived of their passports and hence the ability to travel, until it has been repaid. This can take more than two years, with hardly anything gained by those trapped in the system. Kept in sub-human factory-town conditions, workers live in slum dwellings with multiple persons crammed into prison-cell like rooms. Predominantly male, they are commonly de facto forbidden/unable to see their wives, girlfriends or partners for extended months or years. Comparison to slavery is hard to avoid. Labour conditions are appalling, with laws against working on high-rise scaffolding at temperatures above 40 degrees Celsius regularly flaunted. Deaths on-site are a feature of everyday life. Wages are abysmally low.

With the inception of the **Guggenheim Abu Dhabi** project, awareness of the responsibility and complicity of the art world in these abuses became evident in the US. Like the NYU campaign in the case of education, art practitioners believed they could have some degree of real leverage through activism in their own professional field. Headed by artists such as Walid Raad, a new group under the name of Gulf Labor brought the issue to the attention of the art world around 2010-11.<sup>7</sup> Since then, a variety of strategies and tactics have been tried and developed – from letter-writing campaigns, to developing fake Guggenheim websites to occupations of the NY museum. It also involved art itself, with a weekly series of art works circulated, criticizing the harsh labour regime and the Guggenheim in particular.

In recent years, the Guggenheim Foundation has done much to discredit its remarkable collection and history. The flagship of the neoliberal agenda, it stands at the forefront of turning art collections into corporate franchises. As a Helsinki and Berlin based organization, Perpetuum Mobile had already been witness to its deleterious business strategies in the Finnish capital at first hand. In a procedure in



From the opening of “To The Square 2”, a Perpetuum Mobile project commissioned by Checkpoint Helsinki, which addressed the issues of political art in public space. Helsinki, 2014. Photo credits: Jani Ahlstedt/Checkpoint Helsinki/Perpetuum Mobile

preparation behind closed doors since 2010, the Guggenheim Foundation received 1.2 million in tax-payers’ money, topped up by corporate-friendly Finnish foundations to almost 2 million euros. This slush-fund was offered to the corporation to finance a “feasibility study” for a new **Helsinki Guggenheim**. In a clear conflict of interest, this study was carried out under the auspices of the Guggenheim Foundation itself.<sup>8</sup> It didn’t take long for the millionaire-studded working committee to respond with a self-serving “yes” to its own idea.<sup>9</sup>

The methods of the “feasibility study” were also dubious. From the point of view of the local art scene and administrators, the public face of this operation was a handful of young college graduates - just out of elite business schools, judging by their age and designer suits. Personal reports describe their research as consisting of highly superficial interviews with local art officials, lasting no more than 20 minutes in some cases. Deeper discussion was off limits. When the issue of financing the new Guggenheim franchise was raised, the young men were clearly under orders: “We don’t talk about that.”<sup>10</sup>

Alongside the neoliberal Helsinki mayor, an elite clutch of Finnish museum circuit operators formed the core supporters. The director of the public City Art Museum, Janne Gallen-Kallela-Sirén was so enthusiastic as to offer shutting down his own museum, proposing to merge it with the New York corporation’s enterprise. (When this was rejected, he soon found himself with a consolation prize as the director of a museum in Buffalo, upstate New York.)

Given the size of the City budget, let alone art budgets, the feasibility study's figures were staggering. The new jewel-box building was slated at 130-140 million euros, excluding another 30 million in VAT. Starchitects were set on alert. The costs of the planning and founding phase were set at 11.2 million and the annual operating costs put at 14.5 million. The Guggenheim thus would create a "funding gap" of 6.8 million a year, with its expenditure comprising 7/8 of the Helsinki City art museum's budget. Best of all, the project would charge a "licensing fee" for the Guggenheim brand of 30 million dollars over 20 years – that is, 1.5 million a year for the Guggenheim's logo.<sup>11</sup> It comes as no surprise then, that the "study" proposed that almost the entirety of the financing for this corporate enterprise was to come from the public purse.

Projections were made in all seriousness for closing down primary schools to foot the bill. Artists were dumbfounded by the figures, and rightfully came to expect that their still half-decent Nordic-style funding system would soon be put to the axe. Asked about their appreciation of the Finnish art scene and its place in the new building, the Guggenheim's directors offered that, in fact, they had a taste for Finnish architecture and design. While the local tax payer was set to pay for the lions share of the museum, the Guggenheim intended to reserve for itself the right to organize its program as it pleased - at least for the first three years. The board composition was to be approximately half-half.



The Square newspaper stand and info point at "To The Square 2", Lasipalatsi Square, Helsinki, 2014. Photo credits: Jani Ahlstedt/Checkpoint Helsinki/Perpetuum Mobile



Non-Googleheim (Vladan Jeremić & Rena Rädle) & ZIP Group installation (detail) at “To The Square 2”, Lasipalatsi Square, Helsinki, 2014. Photo credits: Rena Rädle

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Back in Venice, shortly after Karl Marx’s birthday, things were gearing up for an eventful day. A press-conference was scheduled for 10 a.m. at the Cafe Paradiso in front of the Giardini. News was spread by work of mouth – for fear the police would catch wind of the action and intervene immediately, stopping the flotilla of boats from disembarking. The plan was to float with fanfare and protest-banners out into the Laguna and down the Grand Canal, to land at the Peggy Guggenheim’s grand water-side entrance and to occupy the museum.

The day before the occupation a series of talks were held under the name “*Abstrike* - Let’s Strike! Towards an inter-continental platform for art and cultural workers.”<sup>12</sup> The presentations at S.a.L.E. Docks included many of the upcoming action’s participants. Among them were Marco Baravalle (S.a.L.E. Docks), Andrew Ross, Nitasha Dhillon, Amin Husain, Noah Fischer and Gregory Sholette (G.U.L.F - Gulf Labor), Luigi Galimberti (European Alternatives/Transnational Dialogues), Roberto Ciccarelli (Il Manifesto - La Furia dei cervelli), Cooperativa Crater Invertido and Art Collaboratory, Gluklya (Natalia Pershina-Yakimanskaya) and Anna Bitkina (TOK Curator), Emanuele Braga (MACAO) and Ivor Stodolsky and Marita Muukkonen (Perpetuum Mobile).



The wrought-iron gate of the Peggy Guggenheim Museum. #GuggOccupied at the Venice Biennale 2015. Photo credit: Perpetuum Mobile

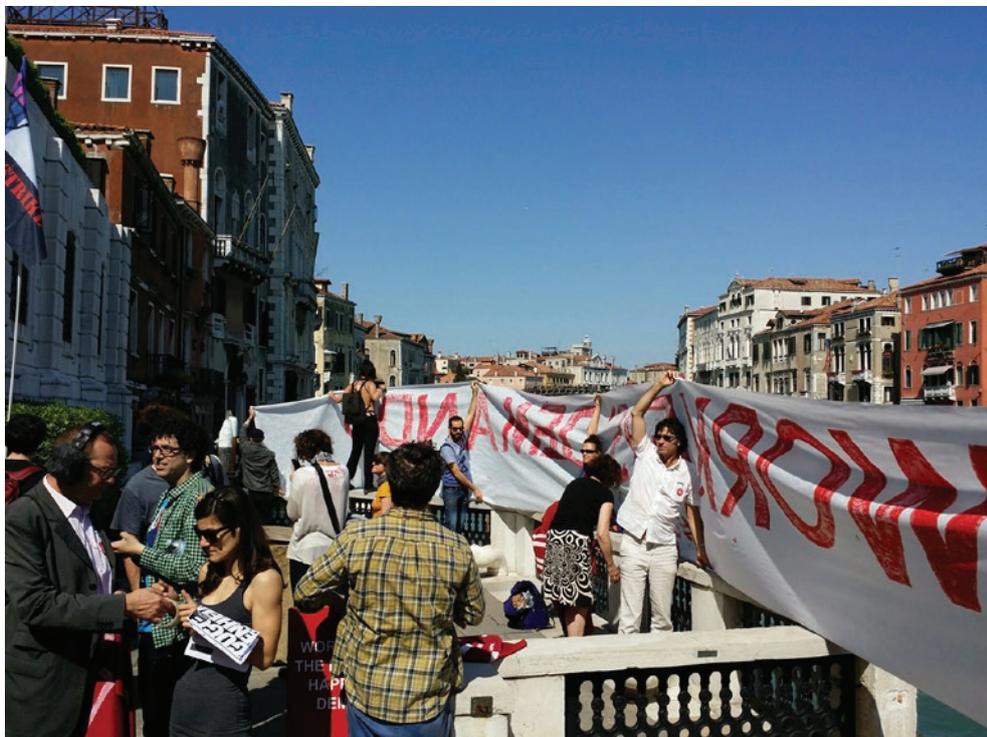
The planned occupation was not publicly announced, but an expectant enthusiasm was in the air. The artist **Joulia Strauss** worked tirelessly throughout the proceedings on a large banner in the adjacent space. Yet that night, at an assembly with members of the Gulf Labor Coalition, S.a.L.E. Docks and Perpetuum Mobile, it became clear that the proposed plan was flawed. Under a law which forbids protests on the Laguna and Grand Canal, the police could stop and easily detain the flotilla before it reached the Guggenheim, given the long distance to be covered. So a new two-pronged strategy was developed. The press conference was to be held parallel to the occupation, which would be launched directly from S.a.L.E. We at Perpetuum Mobile took on a special task: to enter the museum early in the morning, to survey the landing-dock and security arrangements prior to the flotilla landing – that is, to occupy the museum from within.

Aside from a knee injury – incurred as a guard smashed the wrought-iron gates we tried to hold open as our fellow activist-occupiers disembarked from their boats – the occupation went surprisingly smoothly. Indeed, having noticed a party on the roof-terrace before opening time, we found a way upstairs to this breakfast-bonanza organized by Christie’s auction house. Fresh-pressed orange juice aside, it made for nice shots of the Grand Canal landing-dock to be occupied. The conversations, however, were appalling. As if straight out of a 19th century novel, elegant breakfast guests were overheard averring that, “if you give the workers a finger, they’ll take your arm!” More up-to-date chit-chat included, “Diamonds are on the down, I am investing in contemporary art...”

The plan to occupy the Venice Guggenheim was initiated by **G.U.L.F.** (Global Ultra Luxury Faction), the Coalition's activist section. A few days earlier, on 1st of May, G.U.L.F. had occupied the rotunda of the Guggenheim's famed spiraling Frank Lloyd Wright building in New York, demanding direct talks with the corporate leadership. Their demand was refused and the museum was closed instead. As the sociologist-activist Andrew Ross, a senior member of the Gulf Labor Coalition explained, the occupation of the Venice Guggenheim on the 5th May was a follow-up on these unmet demands for direct talks.

S.a.L.E. Docks and a variety of local and international groups played an indispensable role in planning and carrying out the action initiated by the New Yorkers. Nevertheless, because the Gulf Labor Coalition was officially invited to Venice by Okwui Enwezor to participate in the Biennale with a large banner-work in the Arsenale, a certain sense lingered of the occupation being part of an artistic, rather than a distinctly political process. Perhaps this is what led some in G.U.L.F. to take on the role of *primus inter pares* – a “verticalization” of organization which marks a change in approach for those of them who had advocated a far more horizontal structure as part of the Occupy movement.

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#GuggOccupied at the Venice Biennale 2015.

Photo credit: Perpetuum Mobile



#GuggOccupied at the Venice Biennale 2015.

Photo credit: Perpetuum Mobile

This shift from the principles of assembly-based decision-making to a more “democratic centralist” approach was not reflected on in public, although it deserves separate analysis and discussion. Only a few general issues can be raised in the scope of this article. On the other hand, to what extent can or should one effectively counter a 1% corporate oligarchy with a not-dissimilar elite organizational structure? Considering the specificity of the field of art, to what extent is this structure inherited from the traditional artistic model in which the “artist” has the final word on the (in this case, political) “work”? In other words, can the political message and impetus be effective through or despite an elite institutional form?

On the other hand, considering mass roots-level democracy, there is no doubt that Occupy’s forms of consensus-oriented decision-making processes have proved problematic. Not only are such procedures at times difficult and cumbersome in practice, but many have criticized the form of the assembly for masking and reproducing multiple hierarchies while claiming roots-democratic legitimacy. In the first place, participation itself requires the privileged position of having the resources of time, money, health and the institutional knowledge and positioning to be present. Furthermore, many social inequalities and power relations are inevitably imported into the assembly form itself.<sup>13</sup> Without such self-critique – and while paradoxically rejecting the traditional democratic practice of *representation* outright – many assemblies’ claims to *represent* “the 99%” were highly problematic.<sup>14</sup> However, one

should bear in mind that these very issues also apply to organizational forms which do not claim or strive for equality or consensus, such as elite institutions or operational groups.

A different, semi-traditional form was taken by the movement against the Helsinki Guggenheim: the art-workers association. What came to be known as “Checkpoint Helsinki” started as a movement of artists, curator and art-workers against the use of tax money for building the corporate museum, mobilized by a few active voices and joined by hundreds of others. It resulted in well-attended public assemblies which added to the debate in civil society and the mainstream media. As a voice of art-workers against the proposed art museum, this “anti-Guggenheim movement” played a visible role in turning the tide against the Guggenheim Helsinki. Due to a combination of factors, the City Council of Helsinki voted against the project in May 2012 by a margin of one vote.

Although Checkpoint Helsinki’s assemblies dwindled significantly following this victory in 2012, they maintained a public profile. Proposing alternatives to the Guggenheim project, they argued that a city which seriously considered spending 180-200 million on a corporation should have some funds to spare for locally-organized, smaller-scale alternatives. After considerable delays, they were funded with a modest budget of 200-300 thousand per annum for an initial three years. In this process, the “anti-Guggenheim movement” was transformed into a regular institution with a degree of oversight by the City funders, losing some of its political edge. Nevertheless, it commissioned critical and radical art projects, including *Back To Square 1* and *To The Square 2*, with revolutionary artists from Cairo to Moscow, curated by Perpetuum Mobile<sup>15</sup> – to provide disclosure of my own involvement.

Unfortunately, that was not the end of the story. Not very long after the Guggenheim Helsinki’s defeat, it was found out that despite the City Council’s decision, the Conservative Party major was preparing an architectural competition for a new building behind the scenes. No clear financial model was presented, but somehow a new urban space for the revived Helsinki Guggenheim project was allocated in December 2013. A privately financed architectural competition was officially revealed in 2014, and the results have been recently announced in 2015.

Due to the current politics of austerity and harsh cuts to all social and cultural sectors, the odds seem against the project being realized any time soon. However, the once strong anti-Guggenheim movement is not its former self. Checkpoint Helsinki is, for the moment at least, taking a quiet wait-and-see approach, unwilling to be affiliated with a protest at the opening of the architectural competition.<sup>16</sup> However, they have been part of co-sponsoring a playful counter-competition for the redevelopment of Helsinki’s public space under the title “Next Helsinki”.<sup>17</sup> In any case, institutionalization always brings with it a certain degree of constraint, especially when the City funding model is up for renewal.



#GuggOccupied at the Venice Biennale 2015.

Back row: Ivor Stodolsky, Gregory Sholette, Amin Husain, boatsman from S.a.L.E. Docks; Middle row: Noah Fischer, Andrew Ross, Joulia Strauss; Front row: Marco Baravalle, Nitasha Dhillon.

Photo credit: Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic. Excerpted with permission from:

<http://hyperallergic.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/venice-gugg-protest-sale-docks.jpeg>

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Creating new models of association and sustainable livelihoods is perhaps the crucial issue of our times. Older forms, such as unionization, cooperatives and collectives – long in decline – are in the process of being re-imagined and wedded with new conceptual frameworks, such as the project for a “commons transition”.<sup>18</sup> Experimental new forms are in evidence across the world. The case of the Cooperativa Integral Catalana (CIC), an “integral collective” which brings together hundreds of highly diverse groups, gives hope to ambitious plans for interconnecting the plurality of different forms. Based on these multiple experiences, combining the

proliferating technologies of liquid democracy (such as Loomio or Wezer) and the development of the non-speculative ethical economic ecologies (such as the block-chain currency FairCoin) projects like FairCoop are emerging. These ambitious yet realistic, bottom-up democratic movements are taking their first pre-mondial steps.

New parties which have grown out of the protest movements of 2011, such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, are crucial tests for how the question of political form can be answered on the level of grand politics. Podemos, of course, is the new Spanish party which grew out of the 15-M Movement – whose practices, as many know, provided models for Occupy. An important in-between stage to forming the political party, after the 15-M demonstrations lost their force, were the so-called *Mareas* – “the ‘tides’ or ‘waves’ of spontaneous organization against the Eurozone austerity measures: the anti-eviction movement, the hospital workers, the teachers and so on” – that is social movements, many of whose leadership figures became prominent members of Podemos.<sup>19</sup> Although the issue of leadership has been hotly debated, the public leader of Podemos Pablo Iglia argues that: “If anything has made us strong, it is that we haven’t allowed militant nuclei to isolate us from the wishes of society, to hijack an organization that is—over and above the identities of its political leaders, cadres and militants—an instrument for political change in Spain.”<sup>20</sup>

The development of Podemos is certainly worth more detailed study, and its action when in power will be the true test of the party as a political form in our time. The case of Syriza, so courageous and full of hope, yet now seemingly having betrayed its entire program in a shocking capitulation, is a stark warning.

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Returning to Venice once more, one can see that, as in all politics, good timing is of the essence. Once the Venice occupation had closed not only the canal-side grand entrance, but also the entrance by land, the Guggenheim’s leadership was in a trap. Not only were they forced to close the museum, but the US’s Venice Pavilion’s party – the highpoint of the Biennale for the Guggenheim, scheduled for that evening inside the museum – was on the point of being cancelled. The pressure was on. Desperate to avoid a police intervention and the ensuing violence and scandal, an immediate meeting with the occupants was accepted. A small delegation was issued into the halls of power. Here they met senior members of the board, as they had demanded, and quickly received assurances that recently published studies reporting on the dire situation in Abu Dhabi would be read and responded to.

Exiting like victors through the wrought iron gates, the delegation declared the mission accomplished. As the remaining occupiers were informed, the delegation had reached the conclusion to clear the occupation. Their grounds were, on the one hand, that the delegation had achieved its ends of meeting the directors; on



#GuggOccupied at the Venice Biennale 2015.

Photo credit: Perpetuum Mobile

the other, that a violent confrontation with security forces would harm the delicate unspoken memorandum of understanding local activist partners had with the police – a balance which they needed to preserve for another direct action scheduled for the next day. Within less than two hours of being shut down, the Guggenheim was open for business again.

The effectiveness of #GuggOccupied remains to be seen. Since May 2015, Ashok Sukumaran, Walid Raad and Andrew Ross of the Gulf Labor Coalition have been denied entry into the UEA. This shows the Guggenheim and its partners are willing to harden the battle lines, regardless of the stringent criticism drawn from leading figures in the international artistic establishment.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not the public-relations strategy of naming, shaming and occupying it again and again, provides a big enough threat to the Guggenheim to force it to change its malign practices is an open question.

PR strategies have their political limits. The ambitious but compromised political statement of the Venice Biennale, mentioned at the beginning of this article, have made a show of this truth. To institute genuine change, the structural and financial underpinnings is where to look, not the rhetoric. And this requires far wider socio-political transformation.

If one thing is clear, one cannot imagine a wider political sea-change without new political forms. These are fully possible as is evidenced by the rise of Syriza and Podemos, as well as the ambitious experiments for integrating the legions of self-organized cooperative associations into self-sustaining social ecologies. If art can contribute on this historical level, it is in imagining the presently unfeasible. For it is through acts of the imagination that forms that are truly impossible under the corrupt old paradigm, are made imaginable on the pre-mondial horizon.

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This text was presented at the Jan Van Eyck Academy Conference (Berlin, July 2015) and published in parallel in the ArtLeaks Gazette #3.

### Endnotes

1 See <http://www.myartguides.com/venice-art-biennale-2015/events/item/5073-isaac-julien-stones-against-diamonds> and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rolls-Royce\\_Holdings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rolls-Royce_Holdings).

2 “Po-mo” was a favourite short-hand for “postmodernism” used by the renowned anti-Thatcherite sociologist Paul Hirst.

3 <http://www.vulture.com/2015/05/why-is-the-2015-venice-biennale-so-out-of-date.html>

4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kafala\\_system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kafala_system)

5 <http://www.hrw.org/report/2006/11/11/building-towers-cheating-workers/exploitation-migrant-construction-workers-united>

6 <https://fairlabornyu.wordpress.com/faqs/>

7 See <http://gulflabor.org>.

8 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 1.12.2014 Nr. 279, p. 15.

9 Headed by Richard Armstrong, whose annual salary is well over half a million dollars according to the activist-architect office Aibeo (<http://www.aibeo.com/#!no-guggenheim-in-helsinki/c18dj>).

10 Cited by Marita Muukkonen, who was Curator at Helsinki International Artist Programme at the time.

11 [http://www.hel.fi/hel2/kanslia/guggenheim/ps/economic\\_summary.pdf](http://www.hel.fi/hel2/kanslia/guggenheim/ps/economic_summary.pdf)

12 For video documentation see “Ab-Strike: II° Panel ‘Scioperiamo! Verso Una Piattaforma Intercontinentale per I Lavoratori Dell’arte E Della Cultura.’” Global Project. Accessed July 27, 2015. <http://www.globalproject.info/it/produzioni/ab-strike-ii-panel-scioperiamo-verso-una-piattaforma-intercontinentale-per-i-lavoratori-dellarte-e-della-cultura/19120>.

13 As an example of many such critical comments from within the Occupy movement at the time see, “‘Consensus’ and Its Discontents.” Libcom.org. Accessed July 27, 2015. <http://libcom.org/library/consensus-its-discontents>. See also Chapter 6 of Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon*. London; New York: Verso, 2012. Thanks to Andrea Liu and Vladan Jeremic, respectively, for the suggestions.

14 For more on the debate surrounding representation, see Teivo Teivainen and Ivor Stodolsky, “Reclaiming Democracy Through the Square” in *THE SQUARE Issue #1*, p. 11 ([http://issuu.com/ivorstodolsky/docs/tsq2\\_newspaper\\_hr](http://issuu.com/ivorstodolsky/docs/tsq2_newspaper_hr)) and the forthcoming contribution of Teivo Teivainen “A State of Pre-, An anthology of art and theory from the Re-Aligned Project” (<http://www.re-aligned.net/state-pre/?lang=en&lang=en>). See Dmitry Vilensky’s article in *The Moscow Art Journal 2008/2014 (English Digest)* for an unforgiving critique of Occupy (found in Russian here: <http://permm.ru/menu/xzh/axiv/xudozhestvennyj-zhurnal-%E2%84%9685.-nashe-novoe-budushhee.-chast-2/okk-upaj,-kotorogo-vse-tak-davno-zhdali.html>).

15 See <http://www.re-aligned.net/programme-b2square1/> and <http://www.re-aligned.net/tsq2-concept-programme>

16 <http://www.aibeo.com/#!/no-guggenheim-in-helsinki/c18dj>

17 <http://www.checkpointhelsinki.org/en/projects/the-next-helsinki>

18 See the highly interesting work of Michel Bauwens, the P2P Foundation and many other on this and similar concepts, first developed AS [CUT:on] a large-scale commission FOR [CUT requested by] the government of

Ecuador: <http://commonstransition.org/>

19 Iglesias, Pablo. “Spain On Edge”. *New Left Review*, II, no. 93 (June 2015): 23–42.

20 Iglesias, Pablo. “Understanding Podemos”. *New Left Review*, II, no. 93 (June 2015): 7–22.

21 <http://gulflabor.org/2015/letter-from-sixty-curators-critics-and-museum-directors-to-uae-art-institutions-and-their-affiliates/>







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<http://art-leaks.org>