

**What, How &
for Whom /
WHW**

**“There is
something
political
in the
city air”***

The curatorial collective What, How & for Whom / WHW, based in Zagreb and Berlin, examine the interconnections between contemporary art and political and social strata, including the role of art institutions in contemporary society. In the present essay, their discussion of recent projects they curated highlights the struggle for access to knowledge and the free distribution of information, which in Croatia also means confronting the pressures of censorship and revisionism in the writing of history and the construction of the future.

Contemporary art's attempts to come to terms with its evasions in delivering on the promise of its own intrinsic capacity to propose alternatives, and to do better in the constant game of staying ahead of institutional closures and marketization, are related to a broader malady in leftist politics. The crisis of organizational models and modes of political action feels especially acute nowadays, after the latest waves of massive political mobilization and upheaval embodied in such movements as the Arab Spring and Occupy and the widespread social protests in Southern Europe against austerity measures – and the failure of these movements to bring about structural changes. As we witnessed in the dramatic events that unfolded through the spring and summer of 2015, even in Greece, where Syriza was brought to power, the people's will behind newly elected governments proved insufficient to change the course of austerity politics in Europe. Simultaneously, a series of conditional gains and effective defeats gave rise to the alarming ascent of radical right-wing populism, against which the left has failed to provide any real vision or driving force.

Both the practice of political articulation and the political practices of art have been affected by the hollowing and disabling of democracy related to the ascendant hegemony of the neoliberal rationale that shapes every domain of our lives in accordance with a specific image of economics,¹ as well as the problematic “embrace of localism and autonomy by much of the left as the pure strategy”² and the left's inability to destabilize the dominant world-view and reclaim the future.³ Consequently, art practices increasingly venture into novel modes of operation that seek to “expand our collective imagination beyond what capitalism allows”.⁴ They not only point to the problems but address them head on. By negotiating art's autonomy and impact on the social, and by conceptualizing the whole edifice of art as a social symptom, such practices attempt to do more than simply squeeze novel ideas into exhausted artistic formats and endow them with political content that produces “marks of distinction”,⁵ which capital then exploits for the enhancement of its own reproduction.

The two projects visited in this text both work toward building truly accessible public spaces. *Public Library*, launched by Marcell Mars and Tomislav Medak in 2012, is an ongoing media and social project based on ideas from the open-source software movement, while *Autonomy Cube*, by artist Trevor Paglen and the hacker and computer security researcher Jacob Appelbaum, centres on anonymized internet usage in the post-Edward

* David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, Verso, London and New York, 2012, p. 117.

1 See Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Zone books, New York, 2015.

2 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 83.

3 See Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, Verso, London and New York, 2015.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 495.

5 See Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, especially pp. 103–109.

Snowden world of unprecedented institutionalized surveillance. Both projects operate in tacit alliance with art institutions that more often than not are suffering from a kind of “mission drift” under pressure to align their practices and structures with the profit sector, a situation that in recent decades has gradually become the new norm.⁶ By working within and with art institutions, both *Public Library* and *Autonomy Cube* induce the institutions to return to their initial mission of creating new common spaces of socialization and political action. The projects develop counter-publics and work with infrastructures, in the sense proposed by Keller Easterling: not just physical networks but shared standards and ideas that constitute points of contact and access between people and thus rule, govern, and control the spaces in which we live.⁷

By building a repository of digitized books, and enabling others to do this as well, *Public Library* promotes the idea of the library as a truly public institution that offers universal access to knowledge, which “together with free public education, a free public healthcare, the scientific method, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Wikipedia, and free software, among others – we, the people, are most proud of”, as the authors of the project have said.⁸ *Public Library* develops devices for the free sharing of books, but it also functions as a platform for advocating social solidarity in free access to knowledge. By ignoring and avoiding the restrictive legal regime for intellectual property, which was brought about by decades of neoliberalism, as well as the privatization or closure of public institutions, spatial controls, policing, and surveillance – all of which disable or restrict possibilities for building new social relations and a new commons – *Public Library* can be seen as part of the broader movement to resist neoliberal austerity politics and the commodification of knowledge and education and to appropriate public spaces and public goods for common purposes.

While *Public Library* is fully engaged with the movement to oppose the copyright regime – which developed as a kind of rent for expropriating the commons and reintroducing an artificial scarcity of cognitive goods that could be reproduced virtually for free – the project is not under the spell of digital fetishism, which until fairly recently celebrated a new digital commons as a non-frictional space of smooth collaboration where a new political and economic autonomy would be forged that would spill over and undermine the real economy and permeate all spheres of life.⁹ As Matteo Pasquinelli argues in his critique of “digitalism” and its celebration of the

6 See Brown, *Undoing the Demos*.

7 Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, Verso, London and New York, 2014.

8 Marcell Mars, Manar Zarroug, and Tomislav Medak, “Public Library”, in *Public Library*, ed. Marcell Mars, Tomislav Medak, and What, How & for Whom / WHW, exh. publication, What, How & for Whom / WHW and Multimedia Institute, Zagreb, 2015, p. 78.

9 See Matteo Pasquinelli, *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, and Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, 2008.

virtues of the information economy with no concern about the material basis of production, the information economy is a parasite on the material economy and therefore “an accurate understanding of the common must be always interlinked with the real physical forces producing it and the material economy surrounding it.”¹⁰

Public Library emancipates books from the restrictive copyright regime and participates in the exchange of information enabled by digital technology, but it also acknowledges the labour and energy that make this possible. There is labour that goes into the cataloguing of the books, and labour that goes into scanning them before they can be brought into the digital realm of free reproduction, just as there are the ingenuity and labour of the engineers who developed a special scanner that makes it easier to scan books; also, the scanner needs to be installed, maintained, and fed books over hours of work. This is where the institutional space of art comes in handy by supporting the material production central to the *Public Library* endeavour. But the scanner itself does not need to be visible. In 2014, at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, we curated the exhibition *Really Useful Knowledge*, which dealt with conflicts triggered by struggles over access to knowledge and the effects that knowledge, as the basis of capital reproduction, has on the totality of workers’ lives. In the exhibition, the production funds allocated to *Public Library* were used to build the book scanner at Calafou, an anarchist cooperative outside Barcelona. The books chosen for scanning were relevant to the exhibition’s themes – methods of reciprocal learning and teaching, forms of social and political organization, the history of the Spanish Civil War, etc. – and after being scanned, they were uploaded to the *Public Library* website. All that was visible in the exhibition itself was a kind of index card or business card with a URL link to the *Public Library* website and a short statement (fig. 1):

A public library is:

- free access to books for every member of society
- library catalog
- librarian

With books ready to be shared, meticulously cataloged, everyone is a librarian. When everyone is librarian, the library is everywhere.¹¹

Public Library’s alliance with art institutions serves to strengthen the cultural capital both for the general demand to free books from copyright restrictions on cultural goods and for the project itself – such cultural capital could be useful in a potential lawsuit. Simultaneously, the presence and realization of the *Public Library* project within an exhibition enlists the host institution as part of the movement and exerts influence on it by taking the museum’s public mission seriously and extending it into a grey zone of

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

¹¹ Mars, Zarroug, and Medak, “Public Library”, p. 85.

questionable legality. The defence of the project becomes possible by making the traditional claim of the “autonomy” of art, which is not supposed to assert any power beyond the museum walls. By taking art’s autonomy at its word, and by testing the truth of the liberal-democratic claim that the field of art is a field of unlimited freedom, *Public Library* engages in a kind of “overidentification” game, or what Keller Easterling, writing about the expanded activist repertoire in infrastructure space, calls “exaggerated compliance”.¹² Should the need arise, as in the case of a potential lawsuit against the project, claims of autonomy and artistic freedom create a protective shroud of untouchability. And in this game of liberating books from the parochial capitalist imagination that restricts their free circulation, the institution becomes a complicit partner. The long-acknowledged insight that institutions embrace and co-opt critique is, in this particular case, a win-win situation, as *Public Library* uses the public status of the museum as a springboard to establish the basic message of free access and the free circulation of books and knowledge as common sense, while the museum performs its mission of bringing knowledge to the public and supporting creativity, in this case the reworking, rebuilding and reuse of technology for the common good. The fact that the institution is not naive but complicit produces a synergy that enhances potentialities for influencing and permeating the public sphere. The gesture of not exhibiting the scanner in the museum has, among other things, a practical purpose, as more books would be scanned voluntarily by the members of the anarchist commune in Calafou than would be by the overworked museum staff, and employing somebody to do this during the exhibition would be too expensive (and the mantra of *cuts, cuts, cuts* would render negotiation futile). If there is a flirtatious nod to the strategic game of not exposing too much, it is directed less toward the watchful eyes of the copyright police than toward the exhibition regime of contemporary art group shows in which works compete for attention, the biggest scarcity of all. *Public Library* flatly rejects identification with the object “our beloved bookscanner” (as the scanner is described on the project website¹³), although it is an attractive object that could easily be featured as a sculpture within the exhibition. But its efficacy and use come first, as is also true of the enigmatic business card-like leaflet, which attracts people to visit the *Public Library* website and use books, not only to read them but also to add books to the library: doing this in the privacy of one’s home on one’s own computer is certainly more effective than doing it on a computer provided and displayed in the exhibition among the other art objects, films, installations, texts, shops, cafés, corridors, exhibition halls, elevators, signs, and crowds in a museum like Reina Sofia.

For the exhibition to include a scanner that was unlikely to be used or a computer monitor that showed the website from which books might be

12 Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, p. 492.

13 See <https://www.memoryoftheworld.org/blog/2012/10/28/our-beloved-bookscanner-2/> (accessed July 4, 2016).

downloaded, but probably not read, would be the embodiment of what philosopher Robert Pfaller calls “interpassivity”, the appearance of activity or a stand-in for it that in fact replaces any genuine engagement.¹⁴ For Pfaller, interpassivity designates a flight from engagement, a misplaced libidinal investment that under the mask of enjoyment hides aversion to an activity that one is supposed to enjoy, or more precisely: “Interpassivity is the creation of a compromise between cultural interests and latent cultural aversion.”¹⁵ Pfaller’s examples of participation in an enjoyable process that is actually loathed include book collecting and the frantic photocopying of articles in libraries (his book was originally published in 2002, when photocopying had not yet been completely replaced by downloading, bookmarking, etc.).¹⁶ But he also discusses contemporary art exhibitions as sites of interpassivity, with their overabundance of objects and time-based works that require time that nobody has, and with the figure of the curator on whom enjoyment is displaced – the latter, he says, is a good example of “delegated enjoyment”. By not providing the exhibition with a computer from which books can be downloaded, the project ensures that books are seen as vehicles of knowledge acquired by reading and not as immaterial capital to be frantically exchanged; the undeniable pleasure of downloading and hoarding books is, after all, just one step removed from the playground of interpassivity that the exhibition site (also) is.

But *Public Library* is hardly making a moralistic statement about the virtues of reading, nor does it believe that ignorance (such as could be overcome by reading the library’s books) is the only obstacle that stands in the way of ultimate emancipation. Rather, the project engages with, and contributes to, the social practice that David Harvey calls “commoning”: “an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood”.¹⁷ *Public Library* works on the basis of commoning and tries to enlist others to join it, which adds a distinctly political dimension to the sabotage of intellectual property revenues and capital accumulation.

The political dimension of *Public Library* and the effort to form and publicize the movement were expressed more explicitly in the *Public Li-*

14 Robert Pfaller, *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners*, Verso, London and New York, 2014.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

16 Pfaller’s book, which first appeared in German, was published in English only in 2014. His ideas have gained greater relevance over time, not only as the shortcomings of the immensely popular social media activism became apparent – where, as many critics have noted, participation in political organizing and the articulation of political tasks and agendas are often replaced by a click on an icon – but also because of Pfaller’s broader argument about the self-deception at play in interpassivity and its role in eliciting enjoyment from austerity measures and other calamities imposed on the welfare state by the neoliberal regime, which since early 2000 has exceeded even the most sober (and pessimistic) expectations.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

brary exhibition in 2015 at Gallery Nova in Zagreb, where we have been directing the programme since 2003. If the *Public Library* project was not such an eminently collective practice that pays no heed to the author function, the Gallery Nova show might be considered something like a solo exhibition. As it was realized, the project again used art as an infrastructure and resource to promote the movement of freeing books from copyright restrictions while collecting legitimization points from the art world as enhanced cultural capital that could serve as armour against future attacks by the defenders of the holy scripture of copyright laws. But here the more important tactic was to show the movement as an army of many and to strengthen it through self-presentation. The exhibition presented *Public Library* as a collection of collections, and the repertory form (used in archive science to describe a collection) was taken as the basic narrative procedure. It mobilized and activated several archives and open digital repositories, such as *MayDay Rooms* from London, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster and His Committees* from Belgrade, *Library Genesis* and *Aaaaaarg.org*, *Catalogue of Free Books*, *(Digitized) Praxis*, the digitized work of the Midnight Notes Collective, and *Textz.com*, with special emphasis on activating the digital repositories *UbuWeb* and *Monoskop*. Not only did the exhibition attempt to enlist the gallery audience but, equally important, the project was testing its own strength in building, articulating, announcing, and proposing, or speculating on, a broader movement to oppose the copyright of cultural goods within and adjacent to the art field.

Presenting such a movement in an art institution changes one of the basic tenets of art, and for an art institution the project's main allure probably lies in this kind of expansion of the art field. A shared politics is welcome, but nothing makes an art institution so happy as the sense of purpose that a project like *Public Library* can endow it with. (This, of course, comes with its own irony, for while art institutions nowadays compete for projects that show emphatically how obsolete the aesthetic regime of art is, they continue to base their claims of social influence on knowledge gained through some form of aesthetic appreciation, however they go about explaining and justifying it.) At the same time, *Public Library's* nonchalance about institutional maladies and anxieties provides a homeopathic medicine whose effect is sometimes so strong that discussion about placebos becomes, at least temporarily, beside the point. One occasion when *Public Library's* roving of the political terrain became blatantly direct was the exhibition *Written-off: On the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of Operation Storm*, which we organized in the summer of 2015 at Gallery Nova (figs. 2-4).

The exhibition/action *Written-off* was based on data from Ante Lešaja's extensive research on "library purification", which he published in his book *Knjigocid: Uništavanje knjige u Hrvatskoj 1990-ih* (*Libricide: The Destruction of Books in Croatia in the 1990s*).¹⁸ People were invited to bring in copies of

18 Ante Lešaja, *Knjigocid: Uništavanje knjige u Hrvatskoj 1990-ih*, Profil and Srbsko narodno

books that had been removed from Croatian public libraries in the 1990s. The books were scanned and deposited in a digital archive; they then became available on a website established especially for the project. In Croatia during the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of books were removed from schools and factories, from public, specialized, and private libraries, from former Yugoslav People's Army centres, socio-political organizations, and elsewhere because of their ideologically inappropriate content, the alphabet they used (Serbian Cyrillic), or the ethnic or political background of the authors. The books were mostly thrown into rubbish bins, discarded on the street, destroyed, or recycled. What Lešaja's research clearly shows is that the destruction of the books – as well as the destruction of monuments to the People's Liberation War (World War II) – was not the result of individuals running amok, as official accounts preach, but a deliberate and systematic action that symbolically summarizes the dominant politics of the 1990s, in which war, rampant nationalism, and phrases about democracy and sovereignty were used as a rhetorical cloak to cover the nakedness of the capitalist counter-revolution and criminal processes of dispossession.

Written-off: On the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of Operation Storm set up scanners in the gallery, initiated a call for collecting and scanning books that had been expunged from public institutions in the 1990s, and outlined the criteria for the collection, which corresponded to the basic domains in which the destruction of the books, as a form of censorship, was originally implemented: books written in the Cyrillic alphabet or in Serbian regardless of the alphabet; books forming a corpus of knowledge about communism, especially Yugoslav communism, Yugoslav socialism, and the history of the workers' struggle; and books presenting the anti-Fascist and revolutionary character of the People's Liberation Struggle during World War II.

The exhibition/action was called *Written-off* because the removal and destruction of the books were often presented as a legitimate procedure of library maintenance, thus masking the fact that these books were unwanted, ideologically unacceptable, dangerous, harmful, unnecessary, etc. *Written-off* unequivocally placed "book destruction" in the social context of the period, when the destruction of "unwanted" monuments and books was happening alongside the destruction of homes and the killing of "unwanted" citizens, outside of and prior to war operations. For this reason, the exhibition was dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of Operation Storm, the final military/police operation in what is called, locally, the Croatian Homeland War.¹⁹

The exhibition was intended as a concrete intervention against a political logic that resulted in mass exile and killing, the history of which is glossed over and critical discussion silenced, and also against the official

vijeće, Zagreb, 2012.

19 Known internationally as the Croatian War of Independence, the war was fought between Croatian forces and the Serb-controlled Yugoslav People's Army from 1991 to 1995.

celebrations of the anniversary, which glorified militarism and proclaimed the ethical purity of the victory (resulting in the desired *ethnic* purity of the nation).

As both symbolic intervention and real-life action, then, the exhibition *Written-off* took place against a background of suppressed issues relating to Operation Storm – ethno-nationalism as the flip side of neoliberalism, justice and the present status of the victims and refugees, and the overall character of the war known officially as the Homeland War, in which discussions about its prominent traits as a civil war are actively silenced and increasingly prosecuted. In protest against the official celebrations and military parades, the exhibition marked the anniversary of Operation Storm with a collective action that evokes books as symbolic of a “knowledge society” in which knowledge becomes the location of conflictual engagement. It pointed toward the struggle over collective symbolic capital and collective memory, in which culture as a form of the commons has a direct bearing on the kind of place we live in. The *Public Library* project, however, is engaged not so much with cultural memory and remembrance as a form of recollection or testimony that might lend political legitimation to artistic gestures; rather, it engages with history as a construction and speculative proposition about the future, as Peter Osborne argues in his polemical hypotheses on the notion of contemporary art that distinguishes between “contemporary” and “present-day” art: “History is not just a relationship between the present and the past – it is equally about the future. It is this speculative futural moment that definitively separates the concept of history from memory.”²⁰ For *Public Library*, the future that participates in the construction of history does not yet exist, but it is defined as more than just a project against the present as reflected in the exclusionary, parochially nationalistic, revisionist and increasingly fascist discursive practices of the Croatian political elites. Rather, the future comes into being as an active and collective construction based on the emancipatory aspects of historical experiences as future possibilities.

Although defined as an action, the project is not exultantly enthusiastic about collectivity or the immediacy and affective affinities of its participants, but rather it transcends its local and transient character by taking up the broader counter-hegemonic struggle for the mutual management of joint resources. Its endeavour is not limited to the realm of the political and ideological but is rooted in the repurposing of technological potentials from the restrictive capitalist game and the reutilization of the existing infrastructure to build a qualitatively different one. While the culture industry adapts itself to the limited success of measures that are geared toward preventing the free circulation of information by creating new strategies for pushing information into a form of property and expropriating value

20 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, p. 194.



fig. 1

Marcell Mars, *Art as Infrastructure: Public Library*, installation view, *Really Useful Knowledge*, curated by WHW, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2014.

Photo by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores / MNCARS.



fig. 2

Public Library, exhibition view, Gallery Nova, Zagreb, 2015.

Photo by Ivan Kuharić.





fig. 3

Written-off: On the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of Operation Storm, exhibition detail, Gallery Nova, Zagreb, 2015.

Photo by Ivan Kuharić.





fig. 4

Written-off: On the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of Operation Storm, exhibition detail, Gallery Nova, Zagreb, 2015.

Photo by Ivan Kuharić.





fig. 5

Trevor Paglen and Jacob Appelbaum, *Autonomy Cube*, installation view, *Really Useful Knowledge*, curated by WHW, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2014.

Photo by Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores / MNCARS.

through the control of metadata (information about information),²¹ *Public Library* shifts the focus away from aesthetic intention – from unique, closed, and discrete works – to a database of works and the metabolism of the database. It creates values through indexing and connectivity, imagined communities and imaginative dialecticization. The web of interpenetration and determination activated by *Public Library* creates a pedagogical endeavour that also includes a propagandist thrust, if the notion of propaganda can be recast in its original meaning as “things that must be disseminated”.

A similar didactic impetus and constructivist praxis is present in the work *Autonomy Cube*, which was developed through the combined expertise of artist and geographer Trevor Paglen and internet security researcher, activist and hacker Jacob Appelbaum. This work, too, we presented in the Reina Sofía exhibition *Really Useful Knowledge*, along with *Public Library* and other projects that offered a range of strategies and methodologies through which the artists attempted to think through the disjunction between concrete experience and the abstraction of capital, enlisting pedagogy as a crucial element in organized collective struggles. *Autonomy Cube* offers a free, open-access, encrypted internet hotspot that routes internet traffic over TOR, a volunteer-run global network of servers, relays, and services, which provides anonymous and un surveilled communication. The importance of the privacy of the anonymized information that *Autonomy Cube* enables and protects is that it prevents so-called traffic analysis – the tracking, analysis, and theft of metadata for the purpose of anticipating people’s behaviour and relationships. In the hands of the surveillance state this data becomes not only a means of steering our tastes, modes of consumption, and behaviours for the sake of making profit but also, and more crucially, an effective method and weapon of political control that can affect political organizing in often still-unforeseeable ways that offer few reasons for optimism. Visually, *Autonomy Cube* references minimalist sculpture (fig. 5) (specifically, Hans Haacke’s seminal piece *Condensation Cube*, 1963–1965), but its main creative drive lies in the affirmative salvaging of technologies, infrastructures, and networks that form both the leading organizing principle and the pervasive condition of complex societies, with the aim of supporting the potentially liberated accumulation of collective knowledge and action. Aesthetic and art-historical references serve as camouflage or tools for a strategic infiltration that enables expansion of the movement’s field of influence and the projection of a different (contingent) future. Engagement with historical forms of challenging institutions becomes the starting point of a poetic praxis that materializes the object of its striving in the here and now.

Both *Public Library* and *Autonomy Cube* build their autonomy on the dedi-

21 McKenzie Wark, “Metadata Punk”, in *Public Library*, pp. 113–117 (see n. 9).

cation and effort of the collective body, without which they would not exist, rendering this interdependence not as some consensual idyll of cooperation but as conflicting fields that create further information and experiences. By doing so, they question the traditional edifice of art in a way that supports Peter Osborne's claim that art is defined not by its aesthetic or medium-based status, but by its poetics: "Postconceptual art articulates a post-aesthetic poetics."²² This means going beyond criticality and bringing into the world something defined not by its opposition to the real, but by its creation of the fiction of a shared present, which, for Osborne, is what makes art truly contemporary. And if projects like these become a kind of political trophy for art institutions, the side the institutions choose nevertheless affects the common sense of our future.

22 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, p. 33.

