

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 conference¹ 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,² 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



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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.³ 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 March¹⁹⁷⁰. 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 ~~xxxxx~~ handed 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 ~~xx~~ 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 ~~x~~ "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 moved by solidarity towards a small country at the furthest part of the world, now engaged in a revolutionary march ~~xxxxxx~~ to 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 ~~the~~ 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~~ ^{the donated works, which have kept together already} of the 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~~ ^{the} fund of a public foundation to be legally constituted. Such a foundation would be the most adequate ~~expression~~ ^{result} 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 ~~intention~~ ^{aspiration} is that all workers, from ~~the~~ ^{the} factories and mines, from the ~~towns~~ ^{poor quarters} 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 ~~expressions~~ ^{expressions} 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 Kassel⁴ 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”⁵ 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.⁶

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)⁷ 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>