

ARTLEAKS

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GAZETTE

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There is No 'Back to Normal' - Art Workers in Times of (Post)Pandemic Crisis

**ArtLeaks Gazette No. 6
Special Anniversary Edition**

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Foreword

The idea of the ArtLeaks Gazette #6 emerged in the preparatory phase of the 18th Tallinn Print Triennial. This edition of the Triennial entitled Warm. Checking Temperature in Three Acts inaugurated in early 2022, aimed to give thought to the radical political, cultural and social turns that affect Central and Eastern Europe, but also to inscribe these changes in a global perspective through the lens of universal absurdity. The project gave voice to contemporary artists based in or originating from the Central and Eastern European region who reflect boldly and critically on burning issues such as the rise of far-right politics, globally misplaced priorities, the collapse of democracies, the shrinking of freedom – in both life and art – and the general sense of conditioned fear and hostility prevailing today.

As one of the only watchdogs in the contemporary art world, ArtLeaks – as a concept, as a self-organised initiative, but also as a grass-root structure open to all actors and contributors – has been relentlessly shedding light on and voicing the dysfunctions, censorship, discrimination or abuses that artists and art workers encounter in the power and capital based hierarchies established by art institutions. Such a meaningful activity and much needed ethical stance has been enriching the critical, thought-challenging, self-reflexive artistic positions presented in the frame of the Triennial.

It is therefore with real pride and thankfulness that I am welcoming the ArtLeaks Gazette #6, published in the context of the 18th Tallinn Print Triennial and conceived by Corina L. Apostol, Vladan Jeremić and Rena Rädle. I am also grateful to all contributors to this issue who, through their engagement and critical standpoints, keep fuelling ArtLeaks' protest against precarious condition of cultural workers and the appropriation of politically engaged art by cultural authorities.

Róna Kopeczky
curator of the 18th Tallinn Print Triennial



ArtLeaks banners and gazettes at Tallinn Triennial, Kai Art Center, 2022. Photo: Mari-Leen Kiipli.

There is No ‘Back to Normal’ - Art Workers in Times of (Post)Pandemic Crisis

Introduction

Ten years ago, international members of ArtLeaks decided to launch an open call for the ArtLeaks Gazette, a new publication, in addition to the archive of leaked cases that can be read and debated on our website. Why? Through our Gazette, we wanted to give more dimension to the urgency of transforming art workers’ relationships with institutions, networks, and economies involved in the production, reproduction, and consumption of art and culture. Since the first release “Breaking the Silence – Towards Justice, Solidarity and Mobilization” (which came out in early 2013) we have pursued this goal by testing and developing new approaches to institutional critique in this and that context and challenging certain discourses of engagement and criticality which coopt or tame creative forces. Through gazette issues such as “Demanding Justice: Social Rights and Radical Art Practices” (2017) we also sought to link art workers’ struggles with similar ones from other fields of human activity. Also a decade ago, together with The May Congress of Creative Workers, we have raised the question “What art system do we need?” during the Moscow Assembly, a question which continues to bear relevance and urgency today.

Today, compared to the existential threats societies are exposed to during the pandemic crisis, the problems of the art world seem less important. We witnessed the virulent spread of Trumpism, the re-establishment of right-wing governments in Europe, and threats of global hostilities and continual precarity of life. A wave of aggressive commercialization coupled with massive layoffs has swept the art field, driven by the process of speculative financialization during the crisis. Nevertheless, the climate of social disintegration and political confrontation also forged new forms of struggle and alliances online and off.

While some of the global art community feels relieved after the defeat of Trumpism in the US, the right-wing governments of declared and non-declared illiberal democracies in Eastern and Southeastern Europe have consolidated their power. Their disastrous management of the effects of the pandemic crisis didn’t result in political change. On the contrary, the spreading of right-wing conspiracy narrations about the

Coronavirus, vaccination and the mass influx of migrants seems to back up the support of nationalist and anti-democratic politics in the population.

The authors in this special edition of the Gazette – Mike Watson, Alphabet Collection (Mohammad Salemy and Rômulo Moraes), Vida Knežević, Dmitry Vilensky, Anna Ehrenstein, ZIP Group, Federico Geller, Su Wei, Kafe-Morozhenoe, Maria Helen Känd and Dorian Batycka – have bravely managed to cope with all these dire problems of today (despite the fading of criticality in the post-pandemic context), and have reflected on the new paradigm of artistic production we live in.

Vida Knežević, Dmitry Vilensky and Maria Helen Känd highlight strategies, new alliances and actions are taken to counter the new heightened problems art workers are facing related to their subsistence, new forms of censorship and repression in countries such as Serbia, Russia and Estonia respectively. In his contribution, Mike Watson takes into account that the extended online communication goes together with the increased isolation of the individual – albeit having enabled a new era of do-it-yourself publishing and the rise of the left internet. Dorian Batycka poses the question of how art can respond during moments of profound crisis and calls for a pragmatic shift in the way how art engages in social and political affairs. How do artists get involved in such an (online) counter-culture? Mohammad Salemy and Rômulo Moraes of Alphabet Collection claim that the post-pandemic world of art will be shaped by four, already visible trends. Su Wei writes about the rise of nationalism and the phenomenon of an even greater detachment of reality and bubblicization of contemporary art in post-pandemic China. Artistic contributions by Anna Ehrenstein, ZIP Group, Federico Geller and visualization of the situation of art workers by Kafe-Morozhenoe from Russia tells us much more about how it is possible to communicate post-pandemic conditions of art workers at the periphery.

Thanks to curator Rona Kopeczky and her invitation to the 18th Tallinn Print Triennial entitled “Warm. Checking Temperature in Three Acts”, we were able to publish this current issue of the ArtLeaks Gazette. We invited artists and other cultural workers to contribute by tackling the multiple crises in cultural and artistic production in recent years. The consolidation of nationalist cultural politics, the pandemic-related condition to work and communicate through online platforms, localization of art events, migration to non-art related spheres, substantial changes of the meaning of art and its economy, hate speech attacks by right-wing actors on social media platforms or government media are just a few aspects of this crisis. It is a crisis much more complex and harder than one in 2008 when the ArtLeaks platform was established; it follows that the questions and answers given by our contributors are indeed more timely and distinctive from those anti-austerity and Occupy movements had in the 2010s. The shift of the art world during the pandemic and its changes have occupied our space and new critical voices have to struggle even more to make meaning of our reality. Perhaps we see digital and virtual private spaces offer new possibilities for art workers and producers, to join the flow of uncertainty as the new strains of virus and cryptocurrencies appear and become part of art production and reproduction.

Corina L. Apostol, Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić

Letter from Afghan Artists To World Leaders

published by Artists at Risk, 6 December 2021

A letter from the suffering artists of Afghanistan to President Biden, Prime Minister Johnson, President Macron, Federal Chancellor Scholz, President von der Leyen, Secretary General Stoltenberg, Secretary General Guterres, and to all governments and people in the free world.

Our warm regards to you!

We, a group of dedicated Afghan artists and cultural workers, are writing this letter at a time when our arts and cultural activities have been brutally halted and we pass our days and nights secretly inside our homes in poverty.

Jobless, futureless, in constant fear of arrest and death at the hands of the Taliban, we do not live but merely exist. A profound darkness has befallen Afghanistan.

Over the last two decades, and despite myriad challenges, our generation eagerly grasped the freedom and opportunities that the international community so generously helped open up in Afghanistan to study, educate, and develop ourselves, to fight for freedom, and to defend human rights. We worked passionately for the regrowth of our arts and culture so grievously wounded by decades of war. We succeeded in gaining ground in free expression and the right to vote. We opened cinemas, painted our subjects freely, played music and sang. We made movies, held art exhibitions and music concerts.

Now, due to Taliban bigotry, this rich legacy of two decades is at extreme risk and our work and way of life have come to an abrupt end.

Over the years, sadly, numerous innocent artists and cultural workers have fallen victim to horrifying Taliban suicide attacks and other inhuman atrocities. Yet we have continued to fight against their dark mentality. Our colleagues have faced the many accompanying dangers bravely. Artists of our generation have become the bloodied symbols of artistic integrity, abjuring extremism, upholding freedom, democracy, and human rights.

The Taliban consider creative artists anti-Islamic. These are lies. Knowing them, however, during the recent peace negotiations we raised our concerns about the likely fate of Afghanistan's cultural community if the country fell to the Taliban. Tragically,

these warnings went unheeded. Now our country is in the grip of a barbarous and destructive sect and a dark future awaits millions of innocent Afghans.

Our fervent hope, like those of our many friends throughout the international community, was that Afghanistan would have peace under their protection and that no power would undo the gains Afghanistan has achieved over the last two decades. Tragically that was not to be and the reality is that freedom of speech, international human rights, the rights of women, artists, cultural workers, filmmakers, democracy itself – the bases of civilized life enjoyed by our friends and shared with us – have been extinguished in Afghanistan.

It is beyond belief that the Taliban, one of the largest and most deadly of terrorist organisations, has subjugated Afghanistan. A group that murdered thousands of innocent people, destroyed our cultural heritage, exterminated artists and obliterated cultural centres with their ceaseless, brutal suicide and other terror attacks, are now in control and seen in the comfort of the most luxurious hotels in Kabul and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan the Taliban impose their reign of terror, destroy the futures of Afghan women, close down education for Afghan girls, and preside over the collapse of the national economy and a fast approaching famine that risks the lives of millions of innocent Afghans.

We shall never accept the monstrous misery and darkness they have brought and will continue to vstruggle against it by every means possible. We urge the world to rise up and join us in condemning the horror and cruelty growing daily in our country.

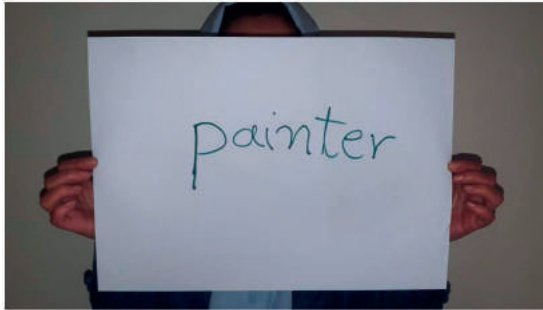
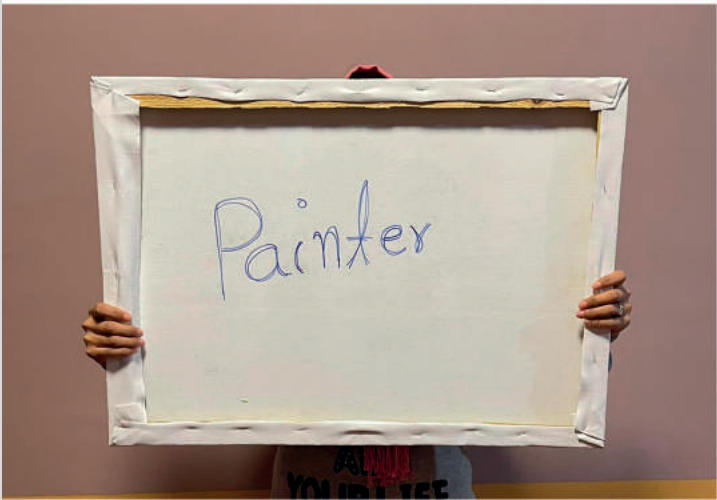
Many artists, cultural workers and journalists are in the gravest danger at Taliban hands and are stranded in Afghanistan. These people need urgent help to leave. There is no future for them in a Taliban controlled Afghanistan. Instant death will be the inevitable result of defiance and to remain is to be forced to forswear our working vocations, an agonizing form of slow death.

We implore you, Mr Biden, Mr Johnson, Monsieur Macron, Mr Scholz, Madame von der Leyen, Mr Stoltenberg, Senhor Guterres, leaders of the Free World and the international community, recognizing that Afghanistan's present predicament belongs not only to Afghans but to all those who have bravely fought and died there, to acknowledge our agony. We ask you directly to hold out your hands to us with practical steps to help us relocate to safety where we can continue our stewardship of Afghanistan's arts and culture and ensure that the precious national culture and spirit of the Afghan people remains alive for future generations. As Saadi, one of our greatest poets, has written:

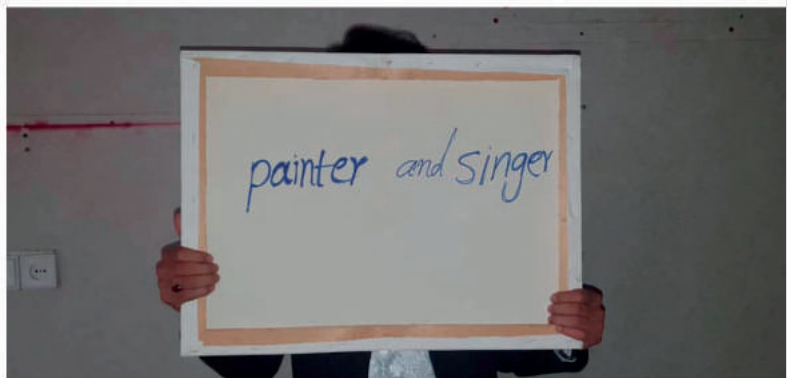
*Human beings are members of a whole,
In the creation of one essence and soul.
If one member is afflicted with pain,
Other members uneasy will remain.*

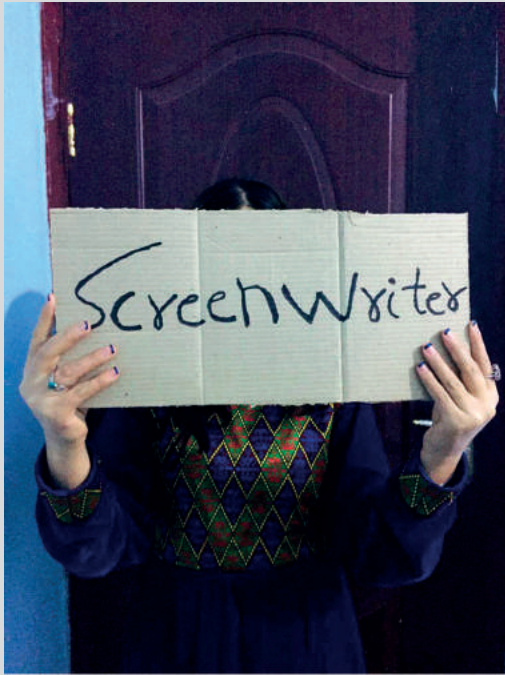
With deep respect,
A group of Afghan artists, cultural workers and journalists











JOIN THE CAMPAIGN



STEP 1

Take a picture of yourself holding a sign with your profession. Show your face if you are not at risk!

STEP 2

Share the picture on social media with the hashtag **#SaveAfghanArtists** and tag **@artistsatrisk**

STEP 3

Nominate 2 friends to take part!

Show your solidarity for Afghan artists and creatives at risk!

This campaign aims to amplify the voices of Afghanistan's brave artists and creatives who have been forced into a life of fear and silence by transmitting their words and images to the widest possible public.

Culture in a Moment of Crisis

Dmitry Vilensky

Introduction (January 2022)

This text, along with other essays from the beginning of the pandemic, has already become (after almost two years), a historical document that records a state of shock and bewilderment, which was shared at that moment by the majority of cultural workers.

At that time, few could have imagined that the state of emergency caused by the pandemic would stretch for two years, and even now the consequences of this crisis for people's physical and mental health, the impact of a deep economic downturn and the transformation of society remain unpredictable. At this point, it is also worth mentioning the added new factor of the Cold War and the arms race, which, together with the pandemic, makes the overall situation even more alarming and less predictable.

It is obvious that the ongoing chaos of planning cultural events – postponements, cancellations, different rules in different countries and in parts of countries, special regulations – have already created a situation of “wandering” paralysis of art institutions. There is a feeling of a growing loss of functionality – participants hardly remember what they agreed on at the last zoom session, emails remain unanswered (or answers to emails from a year ago have lost their relevance), the motivation of participants to implement their work decreases or disappears completely, and since new regulations blocked communal work in offices for a long time, the protocols for working with artists on site (and in the absence of artists) are constantly changing and it seems that everything happens “by force”. Everyone is very tired.

The inequality that I wrote about two years ago is only growing, and if you have the wrong passport colour, or the wrong vaccination, then most likely your chances of surviving in this new world are rapidly decreasing. Unfortunately, the hopes for a radical transformation of the system also did not come true – grassroots care initiatives in Western wealthy societies turned out to be subordinated to state programs, and in the countries of the so-called “periphery” they could not develop due to increased economic and psychological pressures, leaving no time for self-organised action.

The positive radical momentum of the ending of this older article seems to me to be on hold for now. But despite all these arguments, we are still able to think, experience, empathise and implement some ideas. Maybe culture should take a pause for reflection, but few people have the privilege of allowing themselves to stop.

Culture in a Moment of Crisis (April 2020)¹

I started writing this text on April 23rd. For over a month now, all my professional and personal contacts have gone virtual; my environment has narrowed down to one place; opportunities to plan something are limited to regular online meetings to support those initiatives that can be carried out in this format. All projects: exhibitions, trips, rehearsals are cancelled indefinitely. I do not feel panicked and, unlike many of my colleagues, I do not experience acute fears for my life and the lives of my loved ones. I try not to think about how long I can physically survive in the absence of a regular income, in the absence of any illusion of receiving assistance from my state. The help won't come. I just turned 56 years old and it is difficult to realise how the dramatic changes that my profession as an artist and teacher will obviously undergo will affect my future career. I am not alone in this position. Constantly communicating, following on Facebook my colleagues around the world, I see that most of us found ourselves in a similar (or even more) difficult situation.

All of us cultural workers are divided into two positions. Those who believe that the emergency measures caused by the pandemic are temporary and sooner or later (with the introduction of a vaccine, gaining herd immunity...) everything will return to normal, and we will be able to continue to implement our pending projects and receive new commissions. And then there are those who believe that nothing will be as it was, that we have already crossed a watershed moment and, even with temporary normalisation, we will no longer be able to make art as before. The latter realise that a radical mutation of the very foundations of cultural production is taking place, and it is now impossible for us to say what it will become in the transformation that has been in motion for many years.

Contemporary art, as it has developed over the course of the 20th century to the present, is the result of processes of comprehending the world in its catastrophic development. The First World War, revolutions, the Holocaust, the threat of a nuclear catastrophe, climate change – all these events, in many ways, predetermined the formal and conceptual practices of art. Negativity and eschatology remained in many ways the central themes of art – i.e. ideas about the end of history, redemption, reflections on the fate of the world and its transition to a qualitatively new state. It can be said that the radical ideas of the social revolution, shared by many artists, largely inherited the religious Christian ideology, “cleansing” it of any form of divine providence or even spirit.

For a long time, art and culture have constantly told us about the crisis of capitalism, called us to fight exploitation and inequality, and also showed us the anticipation of another world, another consciousness and another form of community, free from any form of oppression. At the same time, being materialised within the framework of the capitalist system of arts, they seemed to find themselves in a trap (or double bind): any materialisation of creative negativity was coopted in the system that it so passionately called for to destroy, and turned into a commodity – the notorious inevitability of commodification. Volumes of wonderful books have been written about all these processes, and it is important to note that art practitioners themselves have always clearly reflected on their “entrapment” and thought out strategies for escaping.

In connection with the COVID19 pandemic, art and culture as a whole have been completely “trapped”, but in some new form. For a long time (the last two decades) it can be said that art seriously anticipated the current catastrophe, as before, when in many ways, it managed to anticipate the revolutionary processes at the beginning of the century or the tragedy of the Holocaust. I am talking about the speculative interest and development in the artistic practice of various theories: those that comprehend the boundaries of human (non-human agency); to the actor-network theory (human as one of the elements of interaction between digital and biological platforms); theories of risk and biopolitical control. This anticipation, not to mention the many different mainstream films and series on dystopias (Mutants, Utopia, and others ...) is a commonplace of the current intellectual analysis of the situation. In this context, the pandemic appears as if not by chance. To paraphrase Benjamin, the virus could have said: “... so my appearance on earth was expected.”

But this anticipation had no effect on preparedness, and the first reactions to the pandemic were marked by intellectual panic, complete confusion, and the loss of any basis for critical thinking. We have been waiting, or we do not understand at all what to do with this pre-accumulated knowledge. How it suddenly becomes a daily practice and changes our entire existence. The virus activates a variety of scenarios – from the most pessimistic (life in a digital concentration camp, with the provision of “unconditional” rations – a basic income), to the most optimistic – the transition to a universal economy of care, nationalisation of key sectors of the economy, localisation of production, control over the environmental crisis, and a number of other changes in the socio-anthropological order. It is worth thinking about the fact that the virus appears at the moment of the complete defeat of even the most moderate socialist-oriented politics at the core of the neoliberal order (the UK and the United States). And this final defeat suddenly turns into an unexpected regrouping of political forces – in a crisis situation, right-wing governments partially intercept a number of acute social demands. The “in-human agency” of the virus suddenly partially suspends the hegemony of profit and progress.

In this turbulent situation filled with mental instability, flows of fake and manipulative news, the art world is trying to rethink its foundations: from the most important requirements for temporary financial support for workers to fundamental discussions about the meaning of ongoing events and structural changes necessary to completely change the system of art production and distribution. This has already happened before, at the moments of the most dramatic historical transformations.

It is worth remembering that after the revolution in Russia a plan of monumental propaganda arose, or how in the United States during the Great Depression, state strategic programs were established to support culture and its producers. We clearly see that in a moment of crisis, society and the state cannot rely on the personal interest of the artist and private models of consumption and support of art. They just stop working. The experience of the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) clearly shows how the state can actively intervene, creating conditions for wide employment for the mass of artists and formulating the general ideological meaning of its commissions. In December 1933, the New Deal administration opened the first of its federally funded cultural programs. The PWAP program lasted only a few months until the spring of 1934, and immediately in 1935 it was replaced by the famous “Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Ad-

ministration” (WPA / FAP), focused on supporting the fine arts, in their extended understanding for that time. In addition to exhibitions, it also included a huge program of murals in urban space, as well as a performative-participatory component - in the form of mobile mini-theatre productions, news reading (Live Newspaper) and cultural and educational seminars. Thus, the “New Deal” program – the economic recovery of the economy during the Great Depression in the United States was closely connected with the unique socialist program for the development of the arts.²

I do not want to speculate now how the current state of the economic crisis is comparable to the situation of the Great Depression – with huge unemployment and millions of victims of hunger. But the comparable scale of the economic crisis is already evident. And this makes possible various speculations about new types of cultural programs implemented by the state not only to save culture and a huge number of jobs, but also to shape new ideological values that have been actively formed in remote discussions from the very beginning of the epidemic. The first statement by one of the most famous and influential curators in the world, Hans Ulrich Obrist, about the need to implement an emergency plan to save culture, makes references to the times of the Great Depression. He said: “With the WPA (Work Progress Administration), art went out into society: artists were paid and could explore and create new work in the New Deal era. This gave many creators their first real jobs and commissions.” Obrist, like many other directors of contemporary art museums in the West, is most likely talking about commissions in the field of public and community art (public art addressed to local communities). He stated: “(...) In this time of crisis, it is important that museums think about how can they go beyond their walls and reach everyone”³.

It is important to note that even now the so-called “global art system” is splitting into national and regional assistance programs, which generally correspond to national programs to support economies. How effective they will be, we do not yet know, but it is clear that they will increase global cultural inequality, between artists from wealthy countries with a developed democratic public sphere who are supported by their governments, as the most important producers of social networks and institutions of criticism, and those cultural workers from places where there is no bourgeois tradition of democratic development of the public sphere.

Nevertheless, the current situation is desperately pushing cultural workers who have lost all means of subsistence to turn to the government in Russia as well. At the beginning of April, several cultural figures from the fields of performance, theatre, and contemporary art⁴ launched a petition demanding recognition of the economic collapse of the cultural industry and the allocation of support to its workers, and above all, the self-employed category and the demand for a universal basic income. They wrote: “(...) Our appeal is focused not only on a response from the state, we want to use the current situation to raise a broader discussion about the socio-economic situation of artists and cultural workers, as well as all vulnerable groups in our society (the precariat). We, cultural workers, want to express our wish that the pandemic becomes an opportunity for the manifestation of social solidarity. We are convinced that only art and culture that can prevent the world from sliding into inhumanity.”

This petition has restarted long-standing conversations about the need to create a professional association of those self-employed in the field of culture⁵ and, at the mo-

ment, a working group is being formed and consultations are underway to create a professional interdisciplinary association of artists. Also, many appeals were created on social networks by various groups of creative workers addressed to the government and local authorities to solve a number of burning problems related to their survival – demanding the suspension of rent, the abolition of utility bills and the postponement of loans, etc.

Given that culture is included by the government in the list of the most affected industries, it is obvious that the shabby Russian budgets for culture, mainly aimed at supporting and preserving conservative structures and ideas, are unlikely to be maintained in the same volume in the conditions of a complete economic collapse. There are more acute and urgent priorities. And to expect that at that moment the state will recognise those who work in the field of independent, critical contemporary art seems naive to me. Also, the likelihood of support from business is falling: their alliance with art has always been the result of personal friendships rather than systemic policy in the field of culture, and now it is not clear why one should suddenly expect business to rush to save culture. There is a small chance that those who have already actively participated in international collaborations will be able to somehow find new options for developing their international connections. But there are very few of them in Russian culture, and there is a risk that those who can will leave after possible future international commissions.

Crisis/catastrophe/transformation/mutation is a long and unpredictable process, and I have very few “good news” forecasts for cultural workers, whether they are from the peripheral critical sphere, or even those in the official-conservative one. In this situation, it makes sense to think about the suspension of the thoughtless overproduction of meaningless events for the development of state or private budgets. Instead, it is worth thinking about how to develop new forms of asceticism and look for forms of a solidarity economy – to combine the minimum resources of micro-collectives, share spaces, develop care practices and seek to radicalise aesthetic programs – to work ahead of the curve.

I would say that in our hopelessness, it is worth abandoning the simulation of “normalisation” in a state of emergency. Benjamin’s thesis is as relevant as ever: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ we experience is not the exception, but the rule.” We need to develop a concept of history that corresponds to this. “Creating a real state of emergency” in history means a revolution. At the moment, we have no material grounds to hope that the intervention of a non-human factor/agency can become the basis for a new social revolution. However, artistic tradition requires us to be sensitive to this possibility and to insist that artists and art institutions at this critical moment take the side of a radical political transformation of society and cease to be servants of the neoliberal policy of privatisation of the common, and become the mainstay of a radical revision of the meaning and place of art in society.

¹ This text was first published on the website <http://rosalux.ru/2020/04/29/culture-in-the-crisis>

² See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Art_Project

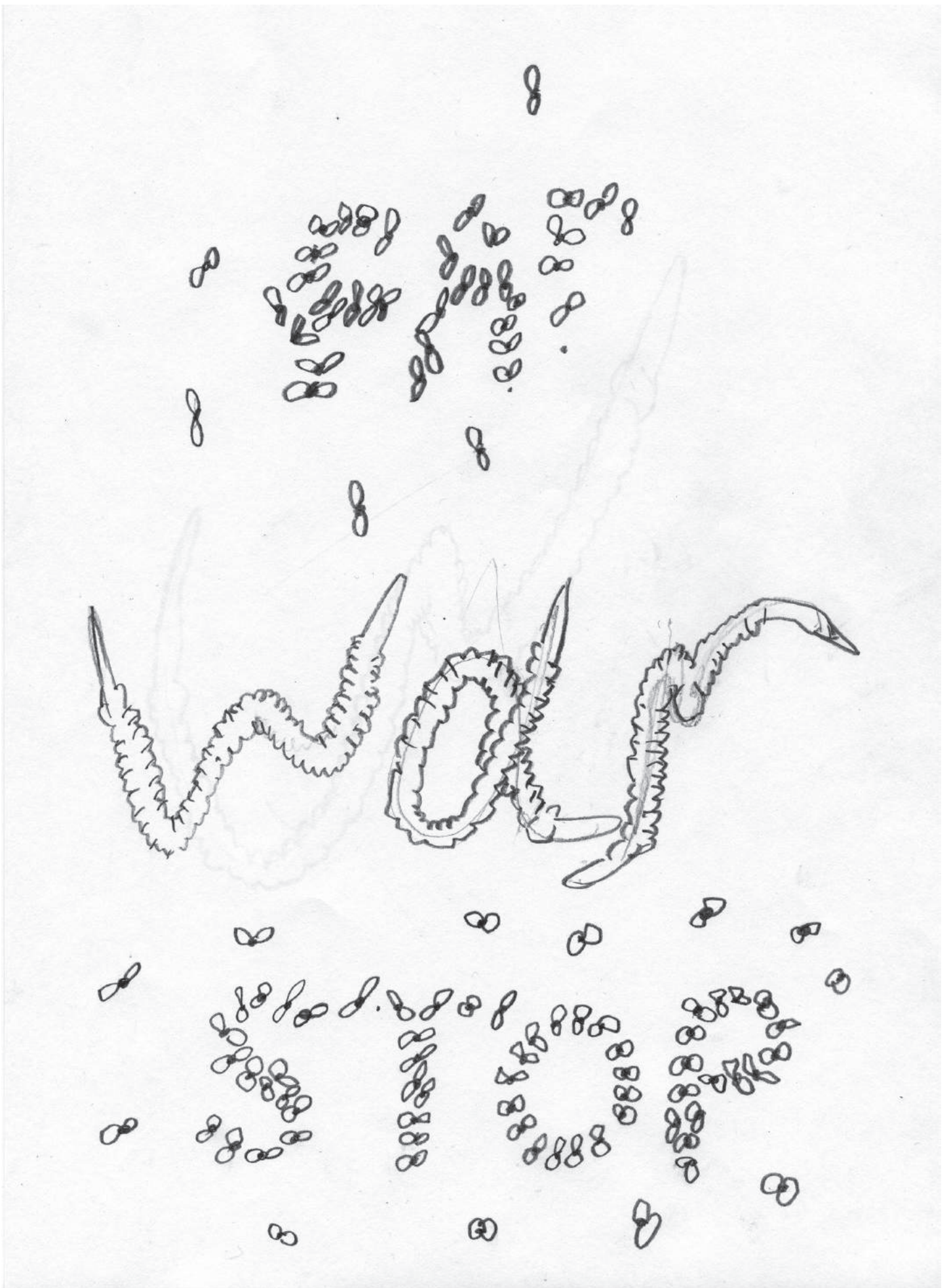
³ See: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/mar/30/hans-ulrich-obrist-uk-public-art-project>

⁴ See the full text of the petition here supported on 04/28/2020 by 7839 people:

<https://www.change.org/p/covid19-covid19-поддержка-деятелей-культуры-и-искусства>

⁵ See documents of the May Congress of 07/04/2010 “Do cultural workers need to form a trade union?” :

<http://os.colta.ru/art/events/details/17117>



ZIP Group, "War".



ZIP Group, "Fetter".



On Not Hearing the Gunfire

Su Wei

1.

January of 2020 marked the beginning of social distancing, in the wake of the Covid-19 epidemic, that was to last for months. During these months, China's cities, towns, and villages were subjected to a strict system of control initiated and implemented by bureaucratic institutions. The system monitored citizens' life and activities on social media with the help of so-called "grid management," big data, and a large number of officials "infiltrating" into the local community. This approach, on top of the voluntary self-surveillance of the mass public, did effectively help to stem the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, at the same time, the inter-personal relations built upon local neighbourhoods and communities – which had already been tenuous and fast-disappearing – were destroyed in this process.

The virus has confined people in their homes. In metropolises such as Beijing, such a singular state of affairs has turned the epidemic into an "information war", as people are wrapped up in the world constructed by mobile phone screens. WeChat, a social media platform recently sanctioned by the U.S. government and long monitored by the Chinese government, has become the main channel for people to learn about the outside world and to express their complex emotions about the epidemic. Because the platform itself can be both official (almost all official media have public WeChat blogs) and private, and that it is indeed censored, public and private life are very closely intertwined in a bizarre and unsettling way.

This situation has continued until today, when the epidemic has been declared to be completely under control in China. It is a moment when the world in your phone and your everyday life have truly collapsed into one another. Not only do you have to produce your "health certificate" on your phone whenever you go into a public place, but you also have to make conscious – even strenuous – efforts to discern valuable ideas and judgments from more perilous ones when confronting messages and discussions on your phone from different friends and fields. Such discernment can be very difficult, even schizophrenic to an extent.

At the end of January this year, and almost at the same time with the full-blown outbreak of the epidemic, I officially resigned from my job as a senior curator at an art museum in Beijing, in the hope of rediscovering fields beyond the staged scenes of power struggle. For a long time, I couldn't leave my mobile phone either, although I knew how one-sided and biased the observations on it can be, and how expressions made through it

could not avoid being performative, mostly improvisational and opportunistic by nature. The art world has been squirming in pain after the Chinese New Year. The pain first came from the capitalist world as well as the art market; the online fair of Art Basel Hong Kong matched this mood. Then, the whole art world brimmed over with discussions under the aegis of “art and the pandemic”, with all kinds of undigested online creations and lecture series on this topic, each proposing a new way of thinking about the crisis. To be fair, art workers have shown a spirit of dissatisfaction with the status quo, a spirit that is otherwise rare and has been consistently on the wane since 2000. Nevertheless, some of the creations and opinions reveal even more deeply our misconceptions about contemporaneity, as well as how untenable this fragile, short-lived sense of the contemporary actually is. Our sense of the contemporary, in other words, cannot stand even the slightest questioning, be it the humanistic question or that about the actual logic of knowledge production.

What really gave me a strong sense of crisis was the outbreak of the BLM (Black Lives Matter) campaign. It spread across Chinese social networks at a lesser speed and with weaker intensity than did the civil protest movements several years ago, including the Wall Street movement, Hong Kong’s Occupy Central and the Yellow Umbrella movements. To explain our lukewarm reaction to the campaign, we need more than the simple fact that local social media platforms such as WeChat have not played an important role in China’s social life for very long. Not sufficient, either, is the fact that Facebook and Twitter have been banned for a long time. Rather, the steep decrease in the communication of the BLM campaign reflects a change in people’s mentality. The Chinese cultural scene caught in various discourses of state, individuals, nation, imperialism, market, freedom, etc. is inevitably falling apart, and the once shared feeling for the oppressed has been substituted by that of defending national interests. In China, people have long regarded race issues as a product of the United States, ignoring its pervasive presence among themselves. Moreover, debates about justice and equality have faded into the background, along with those between the New Left and liberals back with the 1990s: those debates have now rendered themselves footnotes to nationalist contentions where racial issues are concerned. The racist “scenes” and “misunderstandings” we all experience abroad are often reduced – in an alienating way – to “common knowledge”, and are often dismissed as irrelevant as if they only happen to other people. It seems that the issue of race is much less important than that of class, which apparently concerns Chinese people more. The value of such names as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner and George Floyd invariably seem to be of secondary importance here.

As the confrontation between China and The United States – which began last year – has been recently radically escalating, a division between the left and the right is gradually revealing itself in the cultural sphere. Such schism, however, had been otherwise disappearing in the context of the neoliberal economy. The professedly more critical left constantly draw upon the historical legacy of the “first thirty years” (1949-1979) in their interpretations of today, whereas the liberals are having difficulty negotiating a space amidst the ideological struggle between China and the Western world. Both sides are engaged in a tightrope-walking practice, the dangers of which, however, are again obvious: one either slides to the nationalist left or hits the nihilist right. Meanwhile, at the public level, nationalism has reached its zenith with government support, and the recent military confrontation between China and the United States further aggravates the situation.

What is emerging in the cultural and public spheres imposes a strain on China's art world. Admittedly, art inevitably exists in the world, but what better describes the situation is that the art people in China have been passively mobilised at this time, their motivation and self-awareness subsequently still subject to scrutiny. The nationalism and nihilism of the country as a whole have penetrated the art world on all fronts. Despite the fact that the Chinese art people do not often reveal their political stances – not an entirely conscious choice, though, since such practices can also be gestures of withdrawal – a certain collective unconscious is indeed being fashioned by the radical changes in the cultural and social realms. Globalisation, though long proven to be problematic, remains the ultimate faith of many because it is so difficult to confront the local situation squarely: we find ourselves in desperate want of courage, motivation, and appeals when facing the local.

There are even more problems. When immersed in the world inside the mobile phones, the Chinese art people show yet again, and unsurprisingly, a certain 'bluntness' – or rather an insensitivity to reality. Private conversations on WeChat or its more secure alternatives – sometimes one has to avoid WeChat censorship – are often characterised by opportunistic arguments that can constantly shift grounds from the left to the right. Such arguments can hardly leave fruit for future thoughts, and are often no more than vehicles for one's moral superiority and obsessive confidence in one's own knowledge. For art people who are already safely middle-class and even part of the high society, they are indeed equipped with a strong sense of reality as a result of their frequent travels between East and West, their friendships with Western art institutions, their expensive apartments and cars in major cities including Beijing and Shanghai, the education privilege their children enjoy, and not least the skyrocketing costs of artistic creation in recent years. Nevertheless, in the meantime, the truly complex battles in the real world have been telescoped, and the life struggles of real people in faraway places are condensed into manageable sizes. Such a simplistic approach to reality also leads to an intentional oversight or partial sight when it comes to value judgements: they would hold fast to a value that they identify with, such as "freedom" in abstraction.

Such is the art world in the cell phone. Self-proclaimed liberals spreading all excitement gossips about authoritarian governments. Some fantasise that they belong to the White middle-class and thus venerate the unfavourable coverage of China in the Western media. The more ambitious, on the other hand, fantasise that they are the country *per se* and earnestly devise all kinds of solutions to remedy the status quo. There are also many nationalists in the art world who embrace the "local" and "grassroots" and regard them as localisation enterprises, and as a result fully accept the value system they entail.

But there is no protest. I do not mean protest in the sense of the dissent. We do not even need to mention the risks it involves to be a dissenter. I mean, instead, that we lack the kind of thinking produced right in the middle of the quagmire named reality, and that we lack, even more, the ability to look squarely into the clues that helped fashion today's reality. Perhaps the art people in China today should first learn how to go to the streets, to participate in social movements, to debate with others in complex contexts, to create tools to resist police assaults, and to put down their cell phones.

We can only point out, in a way that is rather pessimistic, that the art world in China teems with all varieties of performativity. The sense of the contemporary has not been fully internalised, yet one is already eager to demonstrate one's superior knowledge. Such piecemeal knowledge, adulterated by various motivations and sophistication, are however not solid grounds for discussion. Behind such knowledge demonstrations are one's appeal to power. One is adept at using one's moral stance as a banner, or wielding it a weapon in attacking others. One sometimes does it with a loud battle cry, yet at other times deliberately conceals one's real stance. One can be good at posing as either politically correct or incorrect, depending on the situation, to enchant or to mislead younger art practitioners. One masquerades as a student in front of one's seniors to gain resources, while acting as the authority in front of the young to obtain power. All these have been undermining the already rarefied atmosphere of art discussion.

Some artists, however, choose to quietly rise against this absurd reality in the Chinese art world. Their agenda focuses on more physical participation, and seeks to carve out a space to think by giving away part of one's self. Wu Wenguang, an independent documentary filmmaker, has been continuing his decade-long Folk Memory Project during the epidemic. The project entitled "Passing Through" registers the process in which Wu, in Yunnan, experiences the special period together with other filmmakers located elsewhere with whom he has been working for a long time. The way they experience all this together is called "online yoga": they share their experience within a day, read poetry or communicate other reading experiences together and document their "time together" through film. Other artists, who may not have been well known in the Chinese art world, and who lacked exhibition opportunities, did not give up their artistic creation because of the epidemic or the pressure brought about by the survival pleas prevalent in the art world. Some of them work with a simple attitude and do not deliberately avoid real-life pressure. They polish their work in their own studios and through studio exhibitions initiated by artists themselves, thus finding a balance between art and reality. It is easier to experience a moderate sense of honesty as well as palatable performativity in such creations, especially when they are compared with certain creations and exhibitions too eager to engage with reality. In addition, in the past few years, there have been a number of artists and groups guided by left-wing ideas, who have used practices that intentionally provoke officialdom to give voice to marginalised groups and to find creative impetus in the private sector. Such projects are promising, though they may still seem to lack a clear methodology and are not as satisfying in terms of artistic quality and creativity.

Outside of the art world, the online community *Douban* (www.douban.com) sees the convergence of diverse experiences and reflections of young Chinese from China and from around the world. The vibrancy it promises seems a world apart from today's feeble and arrogant art world. Some cultural figures are also taking action. The official media *ThePaper* took the bold initiative to host a column dedicated to the BLM campaign, in which all points of view, including those by researchers, are cited and set to contest each other. Other media platforms such as *Jiemian* and *Economic Observer's Book Review*, which have long been known for their focus on contemporary cultural changes and marginalised groups in China, have also endeavoured to stage valuable discussions despite the atmosphere of intense political pressure.

These rare and precious actions salvage from reality a little space for the future. We cannot hear the gunfire from the battlefield, but we must understand that gunfire is already everywhere.

2.

The first major spread of the epidemic in China was contained around April 2020, and since then, Chinese society has resumed a relatively normal life. However, the art industry assumed a whole different normality: the past year or so has been characterised by a steady stream of commercial exhibitions by galleries trying to stay afloat, while art consumption returned with a certain vengeance, which resulted in the boom of the art market. A large number of self-styled art museums or art centres were involved in the process, either consciously or unconsciously. This new normality is also related to the phenomenon of “involution” that has been repeatedly referred to in Chinese cultural circles over the past two years. The term has as much to do with excessive competition as it does with the inward-looking trend in current China. As populist thinking has become more prevalent in society at large and China’s diplomatic situation has become more hostile on all sides, and with the Chinese government promoting internal circulation at the economic level, an “involved” tendency in production, service and financial sectors in general has appeared. This means cut-throat competition for limited resources within the borders of China, in which individuals are unable to obtain benefits commensurate with their own efforts. The phenomenon of involution not only occurs in the economic sphere. It also spread to the contemporary art industry, which has been closely linked to the ever-changing social conditions in China from its very inception—if we locate this inceptive moment to the eve of globalisation in 1989 rather than earlier, so as to satisfy our desire (if not illusion) of being constantly positioned in a global context from the very beginning.

To put it this way is not to suggest a reductionist art-society mimesis. Unlike Chinese artists who began their conceptual art practice underground or without any official institutional support at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, today’s practitioners are more adept at exploiting the trends of the times and pinpointing certain foreseeable, short-term future trends. Few would still adhere to radicalism, experimentations, or a marginal position: not only do they see such positions as dualistic and obsolete, but they also give vent to a certain nihilism that has long been brewing. Viewed from this perspective, the pandemic proves not an opportunity for reflection for the Chinese contemporary art industry. Most reflections, that are visible now, are more of a performance than being actually earnest, because the embarrassing situation today has long germinated in the history of Chinese contemporary art. Reflections are too long-overdue to justify the collective indulgence in the performance now.

The widening gap between Chinese contemporary art practice and the most experimental and radical practice in the world became apparent as early as a decade ago, yet it is as if all of these never happened. What is more worrying is that this gap has now revealed itself in the post-pandemic time in an unmistakable yet alarming fashion. This is certainly not the attitude of the colonised whose gaze is fixed on the “more advanced”, but it is an inconvenient reality nonetheless. We continue our practice and operate with

the old commercial model as well as with the old mindset of power, and take a long and comfortable siesta while the borders are still closed.

Even in practices and discussions that we consider serious and radical, it is not difficult to detect this tendency towards involution, albeit in a more complex manner.

By way of further explanation, we can start with an emerging phenomenon in the period that started from the pandemic, which foregrounded closer communication between the academia and the art world in China. The two fields of curatorial and artistic research in China start to converge through new social media groups, academic seminars or videoconferences that would involve participation from both sides. This small world includes active researchers and writers both inside and outside the academy, young practitioners educated in the West, and experienced art practitioners. They – myself included – would share information about art and political developments in China or around the world, mostly in a very serious way, but also with the occasional jokes to ease the pressure of survival in the art industry. As these exchanges, public and private, are becoming more frequent, some clear trends of discussion are emerging despite certain inauspicious undercurrents (such as the competition between peers).


For example, there is much discussion under the umbrella term of “social research”, which seems to be distinguished from the participatory art practice that was once popular. The dynamic between technology and art is also a popular topic, but is either loudly called out or avoided; Postcolonialism and discussions on the Global South are also frequently present in exchanges across the academy and beyond, from which we seem to observe echoes of the 90s’ anxiety about the identity of Chinese contemporary art; art history is a topic that will never fall out of fashion, and the power to write, or to study art history is no longer restricted within the academia nowadays. While some of these discussions are opportunistic performances or sweeping assessment, they inevitably have to address the issue of “China”, either by asking for research or curatorial material from the harsh political environment and from the strange and tragic reality of today’s China, or by slightly shifting one’s point of observation within the set interpretive framework. When discussions are not about China, then one observes the coexistence of passion and laziness, and of creativity and rigidity, especially when it comes to borrowing from established concepts or methods that are popular in another region. Let’s make it clear, borrowing is never a mistake, “mature poets steal”, said T. S. Eliot, and the ability to make use of a frame of reference from the others is the subject of globalism. However, when the borrowed idea or framework fails to form a chain of meaning that is in dialogue with the local and thus creatively transformed into a creative practice – an old Benjaminian topic of translation – artistic practice then seems to lose the sense of intensity and precision that goes beyond the given realities.

These discussions, in spite of our quick access to information outside the world of China and of some alertness to trending art topics, are often disorienting. Where our will and action are concerned, those involved in these discussions are still the spearheads in the industry. They are always one step ahead of the rest in China in accessing international and local information and actively responding to the most up-to-date art discussions and topics. They are driven by their “initial inspiration” for the art cause, and are devoted to a field that lacks infrastructure, is poorly paid and brutally competitive. But when we get down to the nitty-gritty of the practice, and think soberly about the things

we have actually done and how well we have done them, things become less optimistic. Aside from casting a shared gaze of disdain on those who wield power – and not to mention the fact that such an imagined community of shared distain can collapse at any moment – we still lack that sense of breaking through and transcendence. In other words, we are still too used to invoking and reinforcing established frameworks without even thinking about them. This may sound a bit pretentious or elitist, and I cannot find a better way to express this sense of urgency, but at least in the small world just described, which prides itself on a sense of seriousness and inquiry, this is a real problem.

The pandemic has triggered off the phenomenon of ‘involution’ in the Chinese art industry. However, it has also brought us a failure of borders and a certain equality that transcends geopolitics. Every frontier is becoming central. This means countless interiors are happening anew in new ways. The confined interior of China is one that we want to escape from, but at the same time we cannot pull away from it without a care in the world. I would like to conclude with what I once wrote in 2021: “The countless new ‘interiors’ either revolutionise and metamorphosise, or deepen into further corruption. They can turn into impenetrable hard rocks that resist all challenges, or into single islands separated from one another. These ‘interiors’ create new problems for globalism and its inherent dialogicality. The ‘interior’ is no longer a zone where the communication between heterogeneous cultures is blocked. Rather, it becomes the centre of all communication and the hub all linguistic inaccessibility. The efforts of globalism to create radical spaces of circulation, with all the discursive legitimacy it entails; the frustration one feels in the midst of unstoppable unilateralism; the permanent break with the past and the long-standing nomadic practices: in today's moment of re-division, we have to confront again these long latent questions about interior and exterior, with the hope that a language that could speak about the global and the local explicitly and implicitly, can be created.”¹

¹ Quoted from my curatorial text for the exhibition “The Infallible Interior: The Third Tour of the Exhibition ‘Notes for Tomorrow’” presented at *Sifang Art Museum*, Nanjing, 2021.



Consolidation



ZIP Group, "Authoritarianism".

Anatomy of Inequality: Struggle and Solidarity at the European Periphery

Vida Knežević

“I started taking jobs completely outside of my comfort zone and that I’m unfamiliar with,” a female artist from Serbia, holding a master of arts, stated in an interview. She had to give up her status of self-employed artist and accept low-paid but regular jobs, such as cleaning and manual labour. During the pandemic, her situation worsened. Class inequalities in the world of art have been present before. However, the pandemic made them brutally visible. Only the state of emergency introduced in March 2020 and the following cancellation of cultural events showed to which extent the inadequately articulated and poorly implemented state cultural policies had failed over years. The lack of income immediately brought a large number of self-employed art workers to the brink of ruin. Although systemically unrecognised and often invisible, their work forms a large part of cultural and artistic production, and becomes the “dark matter” of the system¹, as defined by artist and theoretician, Gregory Sholette.

Alienation of the system

In most of the Balkan countries, including Serbia, it is possible to detect the erosion of labour and social rights of most of the people living from their work only by analysing the systemic reorganisation and “structural adjustment” of the Labour Law in the last two to three decades. Such an anatomy of inequality is accompanied by two complementary processes that serve to achieve the same goals: lowering the price of labour force and discouraging workers from fighting for their basic rights. While new forms of “creative work”, freelance and part-time labour in the cultural sector are expanding evermore, followed by work from home, work at home, unpaid overtime hours and delay in the payment of fees, permanent employment with social and other benefits – which was the norm in socialist Yugoslavia – is rarely offered.

The ideological cover-up of the class character of work in culture and art and the denial of understanding art as an inherent social good “tailored according to the working people” led to the renunciation of the figure of the artist as a societal worker and the adoption of the idea of the artist as a precarious entrepreneur. “I never had a paid vaca-

tion in my life. I always work”, anonymous female colleagues from neighbouring Croatia said².

The contradiction and paradox of unpaid artistic labour, as illustrated by sociologist and cultural theorist Katja Praznik lies in the duality of the institution of art, which allows artists a relative autonomy in choosing the way of working, enabling them to perform a (relative) critique of social order, while simultaneously nurturing a system of exploitation characterised by job irregularity and insecurity, as well as inequality in the amount of compensation. As she stated: “The prestige and perception of the exceptional-ity of a work of art usually overshadows the injustice of precarious and often unpaid labour that maintains art as an institution”.³

Large art events in Serbia, such as the internationally known “October Salon” – recently transformed into the “Belgrade Biennale” – eloquently show what the exploitation of resources and budgets in the cultural sector means in practice. Instead of investing the two-year public budget for one of the largest manifestations of visual art in the region at least partially in the development and strengthening of the local art scene, most of the money is literally “thrown” at those who, for the most part, already have financial opportunities: private western galleries and their artists. To make matters worse, the first edition of the “Belgrade Biennale” in 2021 distinguished itself by a lack of communication with its few local participants who, at the time of the opening ceremony were still left in the dark about whether they will get production costs covered and be paid for their work.⁴

The grandiose manifestation “Belgrade Biennale” can be seen as indicator of the alienation of the art system from the artists and of the indifference of the global scene to the needs of local art workers, and confirms the problem that unpaid labour is normalised in the art system. However, there exist completely different manifestations from below. The recently re-launched “Youth Biennale” is a counter development to such tendencies – that gives hope that the framework and setting of important events of visual art in Serbia may be different.⁵

Return of solidarity

During the period of global pandemic, for many, words like “isolation” and “distancing” meant little to existential worries and fears of losing a job, of poverty, of losing the only roof over one’s head, of starvation. At the same time, the crisis brought increased empathy, the return of solidarity, renewed strength, care for others, and an even stronger need for political organisation.

For some artists and cultural workers in Serbia, this meant an increased awareness of importance of self-organised practices of social solidarity, intertwined with common struggle and resistance. In a situation where the key governing institutions obliged by the Law on Culture and other regulations failed at every possible level, engagement in putting pressure on decision-makers in the cultural sector and organising necessary solidarity assistance to mitigate the consequences of the state of emergency for the most vulnerable proved urgent. A recent example was ULUS’s joint action with the local organisation “Roof over your head” in defence of the right to housing of a retired female art

professor, who was threatened by forced eviction and was in danger of becoming homeless, due to the fact that state officials neglected her situation.

On the occasion of the International Workers' Day in 2020, the "Association of the Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia" (NKSS), the "Association of Fine Artists of Serbia" (ULUS), the "Association of Fine Artists of Vojvodina" (SULUV), "Station Service for Contemporary Dance", the "International Association of Art Critics" AICA - Section of Serbia, "Remont - Independent Art Association", the Branch Trade Union of Culture, Arts and Media "Nezavisnost" and many others, stood united behind the demand: "Culture for all! Decent work for all!" Their joint public statement presented a "break" and brought a new quality of struggle by calling for cross-sectoral solidarity, thus joining the progressive unions, workers' organisations and other left political activist groups and initiatives in celebrating the historical achievements of the labour movement as well as changing the narrative of the potentials of the future struggles⁶.

From the May Day actions to the initiation of the "Solidarity Fund of Cultural Workers of Serbia" during 2020, united and organised, many organisations, primarily those operating within the independent cultural and artistic scene, have formed a joint "crisis" front that put pressure on the authorities, advocating different – in solidarity and horizontal – cultural policies and changing the dominant "bourgeois" narrative of art as an "act of love".

Instead of a conclusion

The "Solidarity Fund of Cultural Workers of Serbia" appeared as a spontaneously organised but necessary response of the independent scene to the negligence and carelessness of the state apparatus for those who needed help the most: single parents left without any income, older people living alone, without financial help and additional income, families with children without income, etc. The case of the Solidarity Fund showed that it is possible to help and be in solidarity when it is most needed, and pointed out the need for systemic solutions.

Taking into account the last few decades in Serbia it seems that never before social inequalities in the field of art became more obvious. In order to understand these processes better, we need to be aware of the class relations outside – in the broader social realm, as well as how they affect the sphere of art and culture in return. Let us hope that this is one of the lessons learned in this crisis. The second lesson would be that we need to fight for our labour and social interest on our own, creating networks of solidarity and new institutions that will be organised directly by us.

¹ See: Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, Pluto Press, London/New York, 2011.

² See: <https://zakruh.wordpress.com/> (14.01.2022.).

³ See: Katja Praznik, "Paradoks neplaćenog umjetničkog rada: ljubav u ritmu eksploatacije", 2019. <http://slobodnifilozofski.com/2019/09/paradoks-neplacenog-umjetnickog-rada-ljubav-u-ritmu-eksploatacije.html>, (16.01.2022.).

⁴ See: Lav Mrenović, "Oktobarski salon: prespavana stvarnost Sanjara", 2021.

<https://www.masina.rs/oktobarski-salon-prespavana-stvarnost-sanjara/>. (18.01.2022.).

⁵ See: Jelena Vesić, "Bijenale mladih u Beogradu 2021: O javnim pripremama i javnom finansiranju", 2022.

<https://aicaserbia.org/o-bijenalu-mladih-u-beogradu-2021?fbclid=IwAR2dNqv7kSCRY-64mO2fnRY90ifj8s2CwDv0Ere9XixTtQz77hXLtjFeDNg> (19.01.2022)

⁶ See: Vida Knežević, "Povratak solidarnosti", *Manek 9*, NKSS, 2020, 34-41.

AND SUDDENLY THE INSTITUTIONS
THAT HARBOUR COLLECTIVE
CREATIVITY (at least sometimes)
FALL IN HANDS OF A GANG
WHICH HATES ANY KIND OF
COLLECTIVE CREATIVITY

ROCK around the CASTLE by Fede



WE MADE
A GOOD
CAMPAIGN,
YOU LOSERS!
A GOOD
HATE
CAMPAIGN!

YOU VALORATE
MORE THE WHITE
CUBE WHEN YOU
LOST IT!

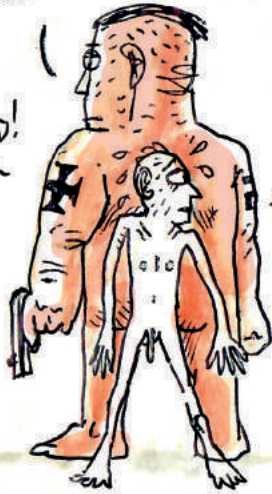
HATE IS A GOOD
MASK FOR FEAR

it's easier
to show and
share



IT'S NOT ONLY A PSYCHOLOGICAL
MATTER. FASCISM IS FUNCTIONAL
TO CLASS INTERESTS AND GEOPLITICS!

IT NEVER
DISAPPEARED!



THERE MUST
BE A PLAN!
THERE
MUST BE
A DADDY!

SHOW OUR NATION
THERE CAN BE AN
ART 4 REAL MEN



YOU R
MY MAN!

LONG TERM PROCESSES
ARE INTERRUPTED



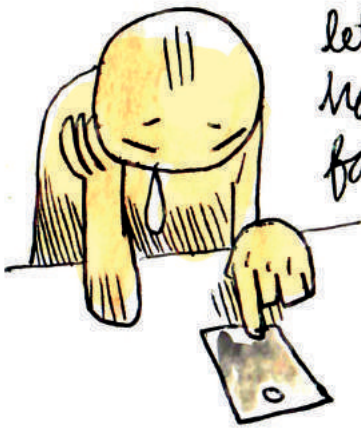
WE NEED A
STRONG
NATIONAL ART



THEY USE
TO EMPTY
THE CULTURAL
INSTITUTIONS

THEY SHRINK
BUDGETS
AND
SALARIES

INSTITUTIONS LOSE VITALITY AND MEANING



let see what happens in facebook!!!

THEY DEVALUATE THE INSTITUTIONS



I KIND OF LIKE IT!

BUT ENJOY ITS INHERITED PRESTIGE AURA

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANISATIONS ARE CUT OR WEAKENED



YOU SHOULD BE IN PRISON! GO AWAY!



HA HA HA

YOU HELPED US BEING SO ELITIST!

INSTITUTIONS THAT SEEM TO BE FAR AWAY FROM 'THE STREET' ARE MORE DIFFICULT TO DEFEND

WHAT TO DO?



IT AIN'T EASY!

HOW CAN WE STOP THE NORMALISATION OF FASCISM THROUGH BOURGEOIS INSTITUTIONS?



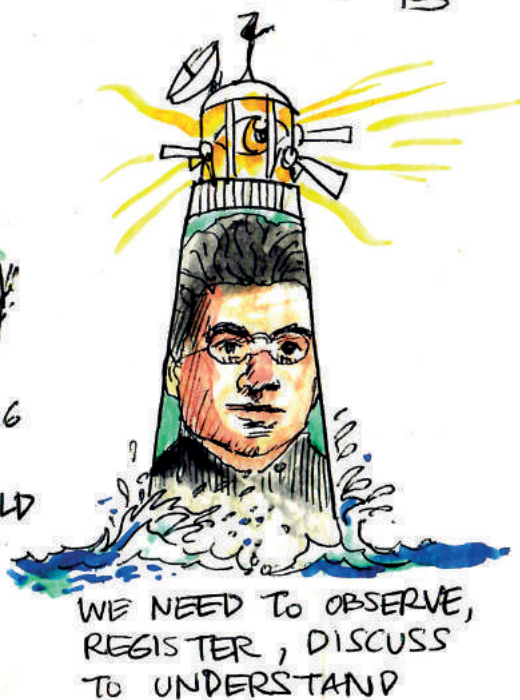
SHOULD WE ERODE THE POWER INSIDE THE TOWER?

I HEAR SOMETHING

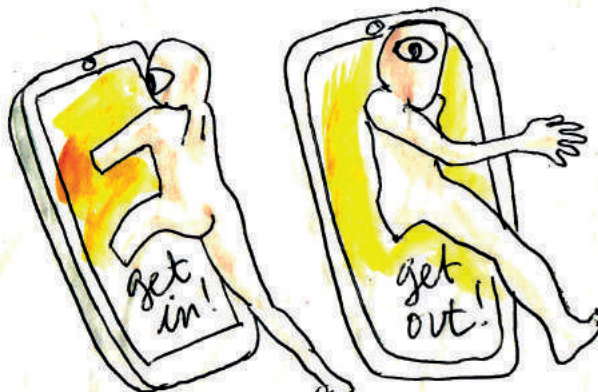




OR ITS TOILETS?



WE CAN CREATE OUR OWN
PARALLEL / SHADOW
DIGITAL / ANALOGICAL
INSTITUTIONS



WE NEED SOME KIND OF DIALECTICAL
STRATEGY, A FEED-BACK BETWEEN
THE DIGITAL AND ANALOGICAL ACTIONS

Is Precarity in the Estonian Art Scene Coming to an End?

Maria Helen Känd

Unlike the Estonian Guild of Film Directors, the Estonian art field has not declared the end of Estonian art by holding a manifesto, even though our artists', exhibition halls' and art workers' sustainability has been in deep water in financial terms. Prior to 2020, leading art institutions, such as CCA Estonia, the Estonian Contemporary Art Development Center and the Estonian Artists' Association, and all interested parties collaborated in order to create an "Art Field Development Plan 2021-2025". The document and a plan of action to be implemented, published in the beginning of December 2021, should change the overall functioning of the art field remarkably, as the current situation has become unbearable for artists and art workers.

Still, exhibitions take place, Estonian artists are represented in international events and the local public has the chance to experience high-class international art. In what terms has it been accomplished so far? To give an outlook of the challenges surpassed in the past decade, I held conversations with the president of The Estonian Artists' Association, Elin Kardi, the Culture Ministry's art advisor Maria-Kristiina Soomre, activist for culture workers, curator, critic and teacher, Airi Triisberg, and artist Maarit Murka.

About the current situation

According to Elin Kardi, compared to other creative fields, the art field lacks employers and public institutions. Tallinn Art Hall is considered to be the only venue associated with the Ministry of Culture and the Artists' Union. Other enterprises tend to be non-profit organisations that survive thanks to self-generated tools. While musicians, dancers and actors are given the possibility to earn a salary in an orchestra or the national theatre, hiring artists in institutions is not possible.

In 2016 Estonia started supporting cultural workers by paying artists and writers a salary. The idea is to offer a temporary safety net for creative professionals in order to avoid non-creative work. This measure is offered to very few (approximately 15 people who are given 1,1 x cultural workers' minimum salary). For instance, EAA consists of a little over 1000 artists and workers in the field but the same amount of creatives don't belong in the association who deserve the support.

Triisberg, an active cultural field coordinator in the 2010s, emphasised problems in working terms and made propositions by saying: “The main issue is the unpaid work or underpayment of creative workers especially in an exhibition context”. This is especially true for artists: while installers or designers may receive a salary, it has long been common practice for artists not to be paid for participating in an exhibition.

The general status quo has changed in the last decade and paying fees to artists is on the verge of becoming normalised. That said, Triisberg still stresses over the question if paying a 300-600 euros exhibition fee for a group exhibition for creating a new work in a large institution is proportional to the artist’s workload, the Estonian labour market and economic conditions in 2021. According to Murka, preparing for solo exhibitions is a long and versatile process: “First you get the idea, then you find the studio space, order the materials, create the artworks, handle the logistics (in the context of more difficult installations collaborating with sponsors and installers is necessary), organise the exhibition opening and marketing. Of course, when working with a gallery or a museum, support is also given by them”.

Underpaid work creates another range of problems associated with social security. Triisberg explains that in order to get access to the state’s social insurance system you have to earn a monthly salary, at least as much as last year’s minimum salary (currently 654 € gross). However, it is difficult for creative people to achieve this, as the format of a license or agency agreement, which is usually concluded with artists or curators, only generates random income; in most cases social tax is not paid and the income is small: there are no guarantees. Scholarships are free, but license contracts and selling works of art are subject to income tax. That makes creative people unable to contribute to the social protection system. This leads to intermittent access to health insurance, no pension, no unemployment protection and no possibility to earn maternal or paternal salary to the extent of minimum salary.

When it comes to the Estonian Unemployment fund, support is only given to people who have been in long-term work contracts. If you have had a short-term authorisation agreement, like many external lecturers, “forget about it,” says Triisberg. Long-term authorisation agreements are the best way to gain access to unemployment benefits, because if “(...) you get a scholarship or royalties for selling your works (...) the Estonian Unemployment fund still says that you haven’t worked a day” remarks Triisberg.

Triisberg and her coworkers convinced the culture minister of the time Rein Lang (2011–2013) to establish a working group which led to some progress in the social protection problem; as a result the monthly aggregation of social tax was created. If art workers in the field had temporary work relations, the tax office changed the social tax order making it possible for creative people to acquire health insurance for one month, if their income was over the minimum salaries social tax threshold. This is enabled for freelance workers in every sector. One other important change that was achieved was that the minister Indrek Saar (2015–2019) raised cultural workers’ salary almost twice (from 731 euros to 1150 euros in 2017).

Even though yearly there is news about highly educated cultural workers’ salary raise, it doesn’t concern many art field workers in Estonia since public account institu-

tions formally represent very few people. “The positive side of the raise is the fact that it has created a buzz in other cultural associations where salaries have risen to the same level”, says Triisberg. It’s still important to state, even though national culture associations’ budgets grow, that other cultural institutions’ budgets are not synchronised with that growth, which does not automatically enable them to pay more salary to their workers. In a situation where non-state exhibition institution workers’ hourly work or project-based work salary grows, it still isn’t in correlation with the cost of living and the high rate of social tax.

The monthly aggregation of social tax, begun in 2016, has enabled artists to receive health insurance, but the aggregation happens usually quarterly, as the incomes of art workers is irregular. Creative associations have proposed that in order to solve the problem, the usage of a cultural associations’ register could come in handy, especially since it’s already being used by associations. “We monitor creative people’s information, activities and income in order to see monthly who almost reaches the threshold to get free health insurance, in order to give the government specific input”, Kard explains. She adds that getting health insurance in that way presumes changing the law regarding art workers and cultural associations.

Making salary payments under private companies or NGOs is also possible but the reality suggests that, for example if the Estonian Academy of Arts pays 500 € for a course, other jobs bring in approximately 200 € and you pay the mandatory taxes on that amount, then coping financially is difficult. Murka says that she does additional work in the field of spatial design, but has done other things such as cleaning in order to raise money. She hasn’t worked anywhere under contract, while selling her works in Estonia is only possible occasionally.

Work deficit is the reason why the art field has become this way, where even underpaid jobs are better than nothing. Triisberg doubts if a freelance art workers’ union could be viable and would sustainably function in current conditions. She emphasises that the most important employer in the field is EKA when it comes to art specialists: “The Academy employs a huge part of freelance artists and unlike other institutions, EKA pays fees.”

The paradox of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia (Kulka)

The budget for the visual and applied arts endowment committee (KuRa) to create art projects is around 2 million euros per year. When calculating the amount of beneficiary parties, if given a standard salary to artists or curators, the budget would not be enough. The problem lies in the fact that large institutions such as The Estonian Art Museum, The Estonian Applied Art and Design Museum and Tartu Art Museum get most of the funding. Thus, all parties are applying for money coming from the same pot: for example, a freelance start-up artist preparing a solo exhibition in a rental space and a museum about to launch their next major international project.

Murka used to ask aid from Kulka but hasn’t done it any more and earns the money herself by selling her works and offering courses, since all the bureaucratic work poured in filling the application is not worth it. “I decided to earn funds for exhibitions

myself, but it's necessary to recognise the limits." She adds that sponsors come in handy when it comes to art materials and transport, but monetary support is rare.

According to KuRa, removing large institutions from Kulka's funding or finding alternative sources of funding for them (for example through the Ministry of Culture, private money or other support mechanisms) would help alleviate the situation of endowments, but this does not solve the problem because the sector already needs additional funding. A current member of the committee Indrek Grigor summarised the absurdity of the situation: "In order to provide operating support to operating institutions staffed by professionals who have already drawn up their own program, there is no need for a team of experts. At present, our activities feel somewhat meaningless. The latter is also due to the fact that the gap between the amount requested and the grant actually intended for distribution is so large that a lottery could just as well be organised."

"The Estonian art field is centred around institutions, you can almost say we reproduce institutionalism," says Triisberg. The idea is that although there may be other currents in art – self-organised exhibitions and project spaces, groups of artists, etc. – powerful institutions influence decisions and model art policy, their representatives have a say in channelling funding, awarding prizes and empowering emerging artists. This is, of course, a natural and understandable process, but it is possible to shift this balance." Triisberg thinks that without a proper funding scheme, there is no point in discussing what kind of art can be done other than what is presented in the exhibition spaces: "In the current situation, when we have such an institution-based approach, it would be worthwhile to focus on good conditions in these institutions and, if people have a sufficient income, they will think about other things from there."

Murka explains smaller-scale exhibition activities: "When I go to the Venice Biennale, I realise that I cannot afford such projects on my own or with the help of Kulka grants. This is the difference in quality that, as a freelancer and without the help of an institution, I can carry out so-called haphazard cultural ventures. Sometimes it is still a compromise in terms of materials, technical implementation, time and money."

It may seem to a bystander that maybe there are too many exhibitions and artists in Estonia who hope for Kulka's support. The question arises as to whether it would make sense to reduce the number and volume of exhibitions in the interests of fair pay and dignified conditions and to make the application process more competitive. Triisberg states: "Although many colleagues would not agree with me, I would consider a tougher competition with fair wage, keeping in mind the possibility of ending up with nothing."

Triisberg suggests slowing down exhibition schedules and shrinking programs. It has been done in the past decade and exhibition durations have grown longer. Another tendency of large-scale international group exhibitions has emerged. "Exhibitions aren't taken seriously if it's not an international group exhibition, and considering the possibilities offered by the art world, holding an international group exhibition is a luxury many curators and institutions can't afford", claims Triisberg. Transporting exhibits and traveling artists creates a vast ecological footprint. Considering the environmental issues Triisberg asks: "Is it necessary to chase the neoliberal global capitalistic mechanisms, where

artists or art workers have to constantly rotate to stay in public eye or should the scene concentrate on local practices and try relating to the existing context?”

The need to put together KUVVA became acute after the round table convened by the KuRa, where the mentioned dilemmas were introduced to the ministry and representatives of the field. Triisberg finds the development of KUVVA to be on a democratic basis, relatively inclusive and well communicated.

Kard, the president of EKL, admits that usually the field of art has not been very cooperative, but the obstacles aren't strictly due to that. “The reason lies in overly occupied employees, because our teams are understaffed and therefore often overworked. However, when normal life stopped due to the pandemic, it gave us the opportunity and time to start compiling a development plan, which had been on the table for over 10 years.” The goal of KUVVA is to increase the value of the artist's work in society. “We've grown a strong backbone over the years – we're managing the situation without asking for help, but the situation has become unbearable for artists these days” says Kard.

According to Soomre, the Ministry of Culture has supported the KUVVA initiative from the very beginning, among other things by financing the costs related to the preparation of the development plan. “As an art consultant, I have taken part in one discussion – concerning the internationalisation of art. KUVVA is an “internal document” in the field next to the national cultural development plan, but the ministry did not want to actively participate in the discussions due to the fact that the art sector strategy cannot impose obligations on the state, in this document: we can mainly agree on the activities of the artists themselves, among other things, communicating and cooperating with the state. Luckily it was accomplished without our participation,” she explains. Developing KUVVA has largely been inspired by other cultural fields. In Estonian film, the deliberate cooperation within the field and consistently advocating arguments has proven to be very effective”, says Soomre as an example, adding that “it's much easier for the ministry if the art field comes together and systematically stands out for their common ideas, problems and objectives.”

Kard compares the field of performing arts where collective contracts and working wage rates were established years ago, and that that's something the art field is working on now: “In their case it backfired and that may happen to us, but it's just something we have to pull through. Imagine an artist doing an exhibition in a gallery, having the knowledge of receiving a fair wage, but then the gallery can't fulfil demands, and that's when artists can renounce and cancel the exhibition.

Soomre comments that employees who don't work under the national budget can stand by the cultural sector's agreement only if they have the finances: “Compared to others, the possibility to earn an independent income for art field institutions is relatively small and the nature of work relations is systematically varied”. In conclusion we need an institution similar to the Estonian Association of Performing Arts Institution, which could at least set up and reach agreements, but living up to these commonly agreed standards depends on financial capacity.

Kard is certain that creative unions alone lack the power to achieve political needs. “If we talk about work wage and social assurance, we're being told to look at other

fields. Yes, the creative sphere isn't the only notable field where workers lack social benefits, but trying to bring together farmers, cultural workers and a third party is even more difficult. Prior to this there needs to be a bigger will to work on it", she emphasises.

Soomre confirms that improving the conditions of freelancers is the most important strategic goal in the upcoming years. "Here, however, there are a number of dilemmas to break through. Should the state only consider freelance artists – who create works as artists – or the wider community such as art workers. Do these people depend on benefits when there's no stable income, or do they benefit from social benefits and a better tax system?" At the moment, we're drawing conclusions from a Praxis survey of freelance creative workers, the results of which were made public at the end of 2021. Based on KUVVA and the "Culture 2030" cultural development plan for 2021–2030, the ministry has set an ambitious goal to create "Europe's best system for freelancers." During the discussions of the development plan, the need to create new jobs at existing institutions (e.g. the Estonian Artists' Association) became clearer. These new jobs would deal with the objective of KUVVA and more specifically with freelance artists. There is also a need to create an independent, self-sustaining umbrella organisation representing exhibition houses and galleries dedicated to the objectives of KUVVA. The umbrella institution would be jointly funded by the institutions included, similar to the Association of Performing Arts.

Focus on local art life, art education and art journalism

"The development plan is not full of complaints, we added things that are good as well", Kard emphasises. First and foremost, the development plan raises a question of art workers coping in current conditions. We've brought out well-functioning solutions and cooperation with partners who hold great value in the art field. Murka thinks that the Estonian art fields' advantage lies in its small size: "In every country there's a national Jaan Elken, Merike Estna and Jurri Arrak. There is a lack of competition in Estonia compared to New York and the UK." Subjects like local art life, art education and art in journalism, attract the attention of the media as well. "We may create great projects but how can we take art outside of the metropolis? We can't be sure that everyone is able to come after a long day of work to Tallinn for the purpose of visiting exhibitions," explains Kard. That said, conditions for local professional art life have to be ensured. Kard adds that small-town exhibition halls are being repaired but the need of constant investments still exists, for exhibiting art – not just contemporary art but museum exhibits which require certain conditions. It is also necessary to value supporting activities like educational programs, communication and marketing, professional installers and designers. Kard says it's a complex system in which small parties need to work together and this can only happen "when these parties don't have to constantly think about getting paid properly."

Communicating art and cultural topics is an essential part of art field's mission and one of KUVVA's main chapters. Murka says being visible around 10 years ago was easier, besides Sirp and other similar publications, the percentage of art coverage in daily newspapers has been reduced. "The reality is that no matter what's written about you, when you do a story about home design or interviews in women's magazines, that is how you get attention. It's superficial PR. The need to attend events and constantly stay in the frame if you're an introverted person like me, tends to make it more difficult to be in the spotlight". For freelancers, getting the necessary exposure is even more difficult: "I

can organise an event and turn to newspapers but the press release won't go through their filter, I need an important person or institution to support me in order to be taken seriously".

A major chapter in the development plan is education and access to art, where it's necessary to get people closer to the nature of art. "Compared to our neighbour, Finland, where getting inside of the art field was a linear and organic process, the big leap here in the 1990s from safe art language to more contemporary content and form, was enormous. Our people, artists and public couldn't keep up with the changes and felt left out", admits Kard. Educational programs in museums and exhibition halls are tools to involve the public, same goes with hobby education and in-service training. The first of KUVAs activities was holding the first roundtable discussing art education; the event took place in November 2021 and was organised by Tartu Pallas and EAA.

In conclusion, Kard emphasizes that KUVAs development plan alone can't solve all problems, even with the general culture development plan "Kultuur 2030" where issues related to art are included in parallel. Documents must be bolstered with a specific action plan and instructions of how to put it in practice. "Kultuur 2030" is currently under evaluation in the parliament and awaits confirmation. "We continue to apply the development plan after having published it January 14 this year", says Kard optimistically.

Conclusion

All in all, it is not only important to create astonishing and internationally ac-claimed works of art and exhibitions but to celebrate the people behind the work – the artists, the curators, the teachers, the exhibition installers and designers etc. As long as we haven't discovered a money tree in Estonia, we have to come up with solutions that may not be comfortable and demand compromises from all sides. Firstly, slowing down the exhibition schedule and reducing the number and volume of exhibitions may be one step – surely not welcomed by all. However, it is necessary not only for paying higher fees to the art workers but also for the climate. Secondly, we need to consider the public and the visitors of exhibitions. How is art made accessible in physical and emotional or intellectual terms to them? It's clear that there is no need to produce excellent exhibitions if people don't come to see them or tend not to or cannot engage with the art presented. Developing educational programmes and media cooperation in art journalism are also key.



Rena & Vladan, "Digital Image Complex"

NFT Planet: In Plato's Cave in the Pandemic Era

Mike Watson

Two years after the start of the pandemic, one thing is becoming clear. There will be no 'post pandemic' era. That is to say, while new medical and communications technologies meet with social adaptations and new modes of living to accommodate covid-19 as if it were a common virus, the main legacy of the pandemic will not only linger but gain strength and velocity. That legacy is the increased atomisation of individuals, which while having begun in the industrial period has been expedited by the internet and gentrification's erosion of public space, as well as by successive lockdowns. Covid is a deadly virus, which we had and have every reason to fear and to shelter from, in the biggest act of mass house-incarceration history has ever seen. And yet it is the viral spread of new communication practices, whether spoken, text or image-based that serve to impede our freedom of movement and association in the long term.

As Sontag wrote in 1977, at the start of her essay *In Plato's Cave*, "Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still revelling, its age old habit, in mere images of the truth." In 2020 Plato's Cave took on new properties. If you note diagrammatic depictions based on Plato's allegory, they portray a group of people in chains viewing the shadows cast on the wall of their dwelling place. Famously, Plato argued that most people, like those fictional cave dwellers, mistake sensual impressions (i.e the shadows) for reality, weaving philosophical, theological and political narratives based on superficial impressions. Yet one thing remains that we could take courage from (however unwittingly on Plato's part) — the cave dwellers had one another. They were a group, and when millennia later Marx said, 'Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains,' he, again unwittingly, pointed to the importance of the stories and theories that the 'cave dwellers' (i.e. all of us) tell one another as they are chained together. *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto* are two of those 'theories' and the success of leftist political gains has depended on theories and stories being shared in groups which were then able to leverage their numbers to exert pressure. The novelty with the covid era is that the cave has become more than ever a residence of sole occupancy. That is to say, we watch the shadows on the cave wall alone and we do not have a group to share our narratives about the shadows with, other than other individuals who appear as projections on the cave wall.

Our reality increasingly consists of digitised images that we ourselves feed into, as a constant stream of audience produced image-objects of which our own image (on

zoom calls, in selfies, etc) features alongside memes, youtube videos, twitch streams, and so on. This system is self maintained and regulating with life outside the stream of images considered a form of non-existence — mortality (or being ‘cancelled’).

Of course, there are positives, or ought to be. The limitless possibilities for image dissemination have created a new era of do-it-yourself publishing on an unprecedented scale. We have witnessed the rise of the left internet across various platforms — from leftbook, to left tube, to politigram and left twitter. The left has radicalised, at least on a theoretical and conjectural level, a generation of younger millennials and zoomers who express their desire for socialism or communism via memes. For anyone who bemoaned the political apathy of younger Generation X-ers or older millennials (particularly during the period of relative economic stability from the late 90s through to the economic crisis of 2007-2008), today’s online cultural landscape should be a dream. Though it is equally a mirage. Everywhere we veterans of the left look there is water (in the form of individual signifiers of socialist convictions) but there is not a drop to drink. Of course there have been incisive moments of protest, but the crucial necessary goal of winning over the affections of a majority of the working class remains distant.

Of course, the issue of what constitutes the working class is in itself a pertinent question. Since post-fordism it has been harder and harder to conceive of a working class identity as workplaces have been broken up into smaller units with fewer workers. The covid era has again expedited this process, which has already developed at an increasing pace in recent decades due to automation and online working. Though this is not to say there is necessarily less ‘work’ being done. Sontag argued in relation to holiday makers that, “Using a camera appeases the anxiety which the work driven feel about not working when they are on vacation and supposed to be having fun. They have something to do that is like a friendly imitation of work: they can take pictures.” Even on vacation, 70s era workers found themselves feeding the mechanisms of industry. Today, workers barely get to go on holiday, but many of us do work for the post industrial mechanisms of capital during all of our waking hours as we post memes, selfies and status updates to social media, thereby feeding the data economy. With our cave wall being effectively our individual computer or smartphone screens, we are captive to an image complex that demands we sustain it.

In addition to our isolation and increasing subordination within the digital image complex, the period of Covid lockdown has seen an exponential rise in talk on NFTs (non fungible tokens) and their applications within the art world. This chatter became feverish following the sale of a number of NFTs by the artist Grimes in early March for the sum of \$5.8 million and the auctioning of Beeple’s digital work *Everyday: The First 5000 Days* (2021) by Christie’s for \$60.25 million (\$69.3m with fees), also in March 2021. These figures are hard to digest though what is clear is that NFTs have brought about a direct financialisation of the digital image-object. Images are no longer purely monetisable because of their relation to data which can be sold to corporations. Today they are potentially inextricably linked with cryptocurrency and therefore relate directly to the value of the financial markets.

What the NFT enables is the verification of a digital artwork as being original and unique, thereby both making it possible to circumvent the experts who adjudicate over value in the art world and opening up a new stream of revenue. Digital artworks,

which had previously been so difficult to commoditise, can now be speculated upon. While this could be potentially liberating, cutting out the middlemen such as the critics, gallerists and auctioneers, and enabling unknown artists to sell quickly via online platforms, what we are currently seeing is NFTs as a further entrenchment of art as an armature of exclusive financial practices. John Berger's adage that, 'the art of any epoch serves the interest of the ruling class' could not be truer today as the image matrix we inhabit now finds itself linked to forms of financial chicanery that benefit the super rich.

It's true that there will be many NFT millionaires, some of whom will emerge from poverty. Yet decades of trickle-down economics have shown us that the slumdog millionaires are the exception to the rule. Given the technical and financial hurdles in making NFT artworks (you need some level of fluency in cryptocurrencies to make an NFT), NFTs seem destined to create a further gap between the haves and the have-nots in the art world. Indeed, people without technical know-how or the time to dedicate to learning new skills (or crucially, access to the middlemen who are inevitably attaching themselves to this phenomenon) may be excluded from the NFT trend altogether. Though what we should be wary of more than anything is the potential NFT technology has to further accelerate the process whereby our daily lives meld increasingly with the data and financial complex. At the end of *In Plato's Cave*, Sontag asserts, "That most logical of nineteenth century aesthetes, Mallarmé, said that everything in the world exists in order to end in a book. Today everything exists to end in a photograph." Perhaps today everything exists to end up in a meme for billions of individual viewers in their caves. Tomorrow, to end up as NFTs.



THE
BALKANIZATION
OF THE
CLOUD

Anna Ehrenstein, "The Balkanization of the Cloud", courtesy the artist, KOW Berlin and Office Impart.



A DESPERATE
HOMAGE TO
THE USAGE OF THE BALKAN
METAPHOR AS A PEJORATIVE
TERM FOR FRAGMENTATION*

*big london energy: paint our borders
and then be usin our blood for ur lingo

Will the ‘Post’ in Post-Pandemic be the Same ‘Post’ in Post-Socialist?

On Old and Emergent Paradigms of Social Responsibility in Art, Life and Beyond

Dorian Batycka

Written in the immediate aftershock of the coronavirus in April 2020, this essay was born from an understanding of political art, and the left in general, as culture in crisis. The ideas presented below were formulated as a materialist analysis of what was then a new virus, and what the political outcomes of the virus might mean for the incubation of socially engaged art. Today, nearly two years on, art continues to appear in crisis, unable to go beyond the status-quo and an emergent political and economic system heightened by surveillance capitalism in its most insidious forms. As we inevitably wrestle with these dilemmas and seek answers to the questions about what art and society might look like in the (post-)pandemic order, we should not shy away from asking ourselves serious questions – about the what, how and for whom cultural life exists, and how our relationship has shifted in response to new political realities we continue to face under what I have tentatively dubbed “perestroika-pandemia.”

“Hostile to the past, impatient of the present, and cheated of the future, we were much like those whom justice, or hatred, forces to live behind prison bars.”

- Albert Camus

The virus that incubated in a wet market in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December in the form of respiratory illness is not unlike pneumonia. Initially, few had any idea where the virus had come from, but soon people started to question whether eating exotic live animals could be the likely source. Soon after, a man in his 60s with pre-existing conditions succumbed to an untimely death, gasping for air – he was a regular at the wet market in Wuhan. People quickly started to blame bats, or rather, their consumption. A woman went viral on YouTube eating bat soup. The Chinese were vilified not as a cul-

ture that brought civilisation the invention of paper and pasta, but as vile, brutal savages. Within weeks, the virus had spread along with the viral video. It was too late for containment. The Chinese authorities, realising this, imposed a strict blanket of control – the battle against the virus was soon led not by doctors of medicine, but by scientists and specialists in computer science and big data. The virus, having taken up residency in lungs and under fingernails, on cellphones and reusable plastic coffee cups, soon travelled far and wide: from South Korea to Italy, New York City to Berlin. And with it, it also exported new methods of totalitarian control based on digital surveillance marketed as pandemic management. But what will the post-pandemic order look like? And what can the discursive field of contemporary art do to help shape the post-pandemic order?

Since the advent of modernism, the production of art has often manifested in its social responsibility. This relationship has always been extremely fraught and problematic, at times even contradictory. Today, two concepts define this appositeness: autonomous and committed art. In 1920, George Grosz, a prominent member of the Berlin Dada and New Objectivity group, defined a similar dilemma, asking to what extent artists, curators, and critics must come to terms with autonomous and committed art. If history has taught us anything, it is that there is an ongoing battle between the oppressors and the oppressed, which may times – during a pandemic or war for example – may make art seem inadequate or even impotent. Nevertheless, indifference to art’s social coefficient negates a crucial responsibility: artists and curators must recognise their role within a political milieu and then adapt their artistic strategies towards a social responsibility.¹

Expanding on this definition, Grosz, together with Wieland Herzfelde, wrote a now infamous essay called *Art Is in Danger!* (1925) whereby the two sketch out a more general definition of socially engaged art:

To summarise: the meaning, essence and history of art stand in direct relationship to the meaning, essence and history of society. The prerequisite for awareness and criticism of art in our time is awareness of the realities and relationships of real life in all its upheavals and tensions. Humankind has been in control of the earth’s means of production, on a large scale, for a century now. At the same time, the struggle for possession of these means has grown ever more inclusive, drawing humankind, without exception, into its story. [...] This struggle for existence, which divides humankind into exploiting and exploited halves, is called in its clearest and final form: class struggle.²

The outcome of this formulation is that art has always had a necessary social coefficient, which is fundamental to an opposing view of history between the oppressors and the oppressed, of which art must necessarily untangle and take apart. There is no such thing as being apolitical, meaning that artists must invariably come to terms with the question: ‘what is to be done?’ Art, whether we like to admit it or not, has always been a weapon of class struggle. However, for it to be weaponised, its usefulness stems not from its “edginess” or “autonomous” formal qualities, but instead upon a social coefficient: to “measure the worth of [art] work in terms of its social usefulness and effectiveness – not according to some arbitrary, individualistic principle of art, nor by the work’s ‘success.’”³ Hence the sensitivity artists and curators exert during moments of catastrophe and crisis, in which a tension inevitably rises between the patrons of art – often rich, well-endowed elites – and

the social responsibility of artists whose interests may be antagonistic towards their own class interests.

Building upon this formulation, it appears there might also be a slight of hand and a contradiction at play. That art, if we take social responsibility at face value, is often woefully unprepared to respond during moments of profound crisis. During socially or politically tenuous times, art can seem futile, even useless, distracting and perhaps even irresponsible.

Since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic that has gripped the world, artists and curators alike have come to realise the brutal extent of their precarity as transient workers within the global capitalist system. Together with thousands of museum workers that are now either furloughed or laid off, the entire art system has been forced to come to terms with being trapped in political, economy, cultural, ecological and now biological extractivist systems; which, if one considers the art market as part of the status quo, means that art is trapped in a contradiction. If art's position within the global capitalist system is truly committed to political and critical art, the ease at which it is appropriated inevitably neutralises art's capacity to foment resistance. This limits art's affective capacity to empty gestures and/or woke grandstanding, easily co-opted by dominant power systems that create and perpetuate many of social antagonisms artists appear keen on resisting.

In lieu of the coronavirus, the art world seems to have become nothing more than a remote simulation of an experience that threatens to totally enmesh us within an Orwellian infrastructure of surveillance capitalism. Plunged into an abyss of digital alienation, the well-oiled machine of the gallery/art fair circuit has always produced a system that exploits art for its symbolic value, now exploited by centralised systems of power (Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, etc.) that neutralise even the most transgressive and critical among us, in effect we are all now subsumed within a broader political and economic system that appears inching ever closer towards full apocalypse.

Thus, in a sense, the supposed democratisation of art via socially engaged practices has become farcical, antithetical perhaps to art's social responsibility. Bearing all of this in mind, art appears to be in crisis, unable to go beyond the status-quo and an emergent political and economic system heightened by surveillance capitalism in its most insidious forms. As we inevitably wrestle with these dilemmas and seek answers to the questions about what art and society will look like in the post-pandemic order, we should not shy away from asking ourselves more serious questions – about art and the art system, and our relationship to the social and political reality we now face under the perestroika-pandemic order.

Reflecting on the lessons history may provide for us now, the Slovenian art critic and curator, Igor Zabel, once described the role of “commitment” in an essay from 2002. In it, he stresses the fact that the “idea of a consciously political or critical art practice contains contradictions that simply make it impossible for us to accept the concept of ‘committed’ art as the assumed response to questions about the relationship between art and society.” According to Zabel, “both opposing concepts – ‘political art’ and ‘autonomous art’ – negate each other in their very opposition and expose each other’s contradictions.”⁴ Though he was writing several years before the onset of social media, Zabel de-

scribed the inevitable tension that exists between autonomous and committed art, a tension, which I would argue, is being played out before our very eyes yet again.

Bearing this in mind, it is important to mention that Zabel was also writing at a time of profound cultural, political and social upheaval, on the heels of a very brutal succession of conflicts that erupted in the 1990s across the Balkans. Thus, while it is necessary to absorb how the paradoxes of “autonomous” art operated back then, it is also critical to study how the emergence of art today operated according to a parallel system of dialectical opposites.

Starting in 1986, Zabel worked as a curator at the Ljubljana Museum of Modern Art, a position he maintained up until his death in 2005. During his tenure, he witnessed the dissolution and breakup of the Yugoslav state, which subsequently led to a series of brutal albeit interrelated ethnic conflicts and wars of independence, which lasted from 1991 - 2001. Describing his experience working as a curator at the time, Zabel said that he almost immediately became aware of the dilemmas of art at a time when such profound political uncertainties were swirling in the air: “my colleagues and I painfully realised that the world of art was a ‘secondary matter’ in comparison with what was happening beyond the walls of studios and art museums, but we also realised that, nevertheless, we could not remain indifferent to these issues.”⁵ Consequently, the cultural and political milieu in which Zabel was working had considerable impact on the dilemmas confronting him.

What Zabel and his colleagues came up with was a way of instrumentalising the symbolic capital of art and dispersing to where it was needed most: in Sarajevo, the heart of the conflict. “In our view, the symbolic value of such an act was based on the real market value of the collection. We believed that, although ‘humanitarian’ aid might save lives, it could also prolong the status quo and turn the citizens of Bosnia into passive victims; and for this reason, we also hoped that the cultural values embodied in the collection would be able to contribute a material foundation for active strategies developed by Bosnian citizens themselves.”⁶

Today, as we wrestle with a different problem, the core issues remain the same. Can art have an effect on the world? If so, how? Thus far, the response of the contemporary art world to the pandemic is rife with cringe worthy examples, from the proto-utopianism of online viewing rooms and the like, art today appears not only woefully inadequate, but perhaps downright insufficient and unsuitable for tackling the critical questions we now face. After all is said and done, what will the perestroika of the post-pandemic order look like? Can art formulate surrogate systems of resistance that develop new strategies in defiance of a now all too apparent new-world order of surveillance capitalism and digital alienation?

In this respect, perhaps, it could be useful to return to Theodor Adorno’s essay *Commitment*, whereby the author unpacks the mutual complacency of committed versus autonomous art, revealing, as it were, several inherent tensions that inevitably exist between the two.⁷ Adorno’s essay approaches autonomous and committed art not as a dialectic with a view of synthesising the two, but rather as two antagonistic strategies that, in the end, cancel each other out. Adorno takes stock of autonomous art – the idea that art exists in a vacuum as a self-referential discipline void of other social or political mat-

ters – suggests that art is independent from life and defines itself solely on account of an historical dialogue with itself. This view provides a monopolistic and patriarchal view of art history as linear, defined largely by Western art history and the Enlightenment idea of progress. Though this theory has been largely discredited, the opposite idea – of a critical or political art (which is based on a keen understanding of the social reality and social responsibility of art in lieu of the oppressor and oppressed system of class struggle) also contains a paradox: that it cannot avoid being co-opted by the very system which it critiques. This leads Adorno to an impasse, noting that if committed art can be appropriated by the very powers it attempts to critique, that it then cannot escape being exploited by the global capitalist system writ large. The tension leads Adorno to suggest that perhaps there exists a “catch 22,” a negation of the idea that art can be neither completely absorbed by ideology nor the marketplace, with the conclusion being that art can continue to serve as a focal point for resistance. Adorno ultimately concludes that the relationship between committed and autonomous art is not at all fixed, that it is permanently in flux, constantly changing and responsive to the winds of social and political circumstances. The crucial take away from Adorno’s essay is his insistence that autonomous art evolve beyond self-referentiality in order to come to terms with evolving sociopolitical concerns:

The emphasis on the autonomous work, however, is itself sociopolitical in nature. [...] At present everything cultural, even autonomous works are in danger of suffocating in cultural twaddle; at the same time the work of art is changed with wordlessly maintaining what politics has no access to. [...] This is not the time for political works of art; rather, politics has migrated into the autonomous work of art, and it has penetrated most deeply into works that present themselves as politically dead.⁸

It goes without saying that while Adorno’s formulation refers to his particular historical epoch, that by taking his ideas further afield we are able to frame non-art art and what are now known as post-artistic practices in a new light. But nonetheless, it appears to me that today the demand for deterritorialising the autonomous quality of art towards social and political responsibility is now, perhaps more than ever, required. Accordingly, the discontinuous space between autonomous and committed art requires a keen sensitivity towards our unique social and political context, but also the ability to see past disciplinary distinctions between fields such as art and activism, technology and politics, poetry and science, and so on. By reformulating the notion that autonomous art can, and perhaps should, contribute to a new general intellect of art and activism, can we then begin to ascertain strategies that question art’s near indissoluble relationship to power and capital.

The herculean task that now lies before us in lieu of the coronavirus pandemic, notably the adjacent policy of shock doctrine that often follows moments of crisis in the neoliberal world order, brings to light several questions about the possible cultural strategies toward autonomous art and its political effects. It’s going to take a lot more than an online viewing room to get through this one. It is crucial, I believe, to keep in mind not only the work of Zabel and Grosz; but also, critically, the cultural zeitgeist that emerged during the massive upheavals across the former Soviet Bloc with *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the 1990s.

The dangers we currently face are numerous: beyond the threat of coronavirus, we are facing an insidious rise of surveillance capitalism, the ascendance of right-wing populism, through to the economic fall out of a world seemingly in free-fall, population control, eugenics, AI and digital wallets have all become the new potential tools of pandemic control. As quickly as the virus came, systems that were once thought dystopian, Orwellian science fiction, now appear more and more likely. As well, rather than generating a collective will to overcome capitalism, the virus instead appears to be segueing into greater and more violent disparities. But at what cost?

Slowly but surely, as the world starts to come to terms with the pandemic and the widespread destruction it has and continues to reign, the question at some point must stop being about containment, but about social sovereignty and a will to defeat not only the virus, but the violent and brutal tenets of capitalism that allowed it to flourish – questions which the art world has been grappling with for quite some time already.

Crucial to altering our course of history, I would argue, is demystifying the accelerationist tendency to critique progressive values, albeit, not forgetting that the failures of the neoliberal world order have now sown their seeds of demise. The question now, invariably, is what world will come tomorrow, and: what can be done today? The task of ascertaining what will come of the post-corona world and instrumentalising of art for the difficult but necessary role of imagining not a utopian new political reality, but one grounded in pragmatism, a collective will to resist, hard work and strong socialist values. Towards a new paradigm of social responsibility in contemporary art, enfranchising art workers to create the fissures that may plant the seeds of a radically new, politically charged, more equitable world tomorrow.

Rijeka, Croatia
April 8, 2020

¹ “Today art is absolutely a secondary affair. Anyone able to see beyond their studio walls will admit this. Just the same, art is something that demands a clear-cut decision from artists. You can’t be indifferent about your position in this trade, about your attitude toward the problem of the masses, a problem which is no problem if you can see straight. Are you on the side of the exploiters or on the side of the masses who are giving these exploiters a good tanning?” (George Grosz, “My New Pictures,” Charles Harrison and Paul Woods (eds.), *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell, Oxford, UK, and Cambridge, Mass., 1992, p. 270).

² George Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde, “Art Is in Danger!” [Die Kunst ist in Gefahr, 1925], George Grosz, John Heartfeld and Wieland Herzfelde, *Art Is in Danger!*, trans. By Paul Gorrell, Curbstone Press, Willimantic, Conn., 1987, p. 59.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 58-59.

⁴ Igor Zabel, “Commitment” [Angazma, 2002], Igor Zabel, *Contemporary Art and Theory* trans. Rawley Grau, JRP|Ringier Publications, Berlin, Germany, 2012, p. 71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment,” *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, trans. By Shierry Weber Nicholsen, Columbia University Press, 1992.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93-94.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF NETFLIX
REINFORCES NATIONALISM THROUGH
NATIONAL DIGITAL ECOSYSTEMS
NETFLIX*BG NETFLIX*RS NETFLIX*AL

LAST TIME ON THE NATION
STATE AS INSTAGRAM
INFLUENCER:

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the corporization of the state + enlightened
whiteness teaching degenerate caucasians
EUropean values

CAN WE REORGANIZE
VIRTUAL NETWORKS
LIKE NEURAL
NETWORKS

Notes On Future Conditions for Arts

Alphabet Collection
(Mohammad Salemy & Rômulo Moraes)

The Covid-19 pandemic is altering many aspects of our lives and our perception of the world, reshaping the individual and collective minds in still unmapped ways. Hard isolation during the lockdowns gave us a taste for schizophrenia: the modulation of routine in an infinite loop normalized silence, exhaustion, insomnia, and even subtle hallucinations. If “all of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone”,¹ as Blaise Pascal once wrote, Covid-19 demanded that humanity struggles with the centre of this supposed existential disquiet. At the same time that the pandemic abolished public spaces, providing only enclosed bubbles and transmission cables between them, private spaces were invaded by the public consciousness that crossed the membrane of our digital screens and speakers. Overall, home turned into a bunker inside of which we needed to act upon the world, with radical repercussions for our mental state. Habits and cores became rituals, contemplation was mandatory, and drugs (prescribed or recreational) provided synthetic enhancements or suspensions of experience. Dared to exist in a state of complete atomization, we learned to become tech-gnostics and self-hypnotists, applying whatever form of technology at our disposal to gain traction on our cognition and experience of our body in time.

In the smaller but no less consequential world of contemporary art, not only were value grids and the networks of production and distribution impacted by the pandemic but new conceptual challenges were pressed against a fragile ecosystem, already under economic, ideological and philosophical pressures for meaningful transformation. The material costs of a rushed transition to online environments and the political barriers implied by the new normal are just some of the conflicts with which the art world has been forced to grapple. Moreover, while blockchain is a promising technology to help artists in the near future, the NFT market is already drying up, and the main questions still remain: how will art and aesthetics adapt to the profound shifts in political economy & perception brought on by the pandemic? And how will the art world keep pace with these shifts?

Perhaps, most of what we call art would soon be reduced and preserved as the history of art. Increasingly, those who have a vested interest in art for reasons beyond benevolence, actors like the different levels of governmentality and many different types of private investors and collectors, have little patience for today’s supposedly political,

radical and meaningful art, which despite its diverse forms, has been nothing but the return and persistence of the values of the bourgeoisie, and thus insincere and overblown. If art is now becoming an obsolete historical category, this certainly is not only the end of “Byron-esque” and romantic art associated with poetry but also the death knell of its nascent sibling, “Pompier” or academic art, which more recently has been priding itself as research-based. In their full spectral variety, these two coexisting trends, which since the end of the 19th century have constituted the art of the liberal, educated professional class as either modern or contemporary art, are heading towards the graveyard.

The future marks the erasure of the category of “meaning” or its transformation to a mere surface to cover art’s new function and ontology. This thin, synthetic surface must become more convincing, hence all the gestures of late “socially engaged art.” The transformation here is a shift from the aesthetic-form and its significance and towards the aesthetics of pure power in late capitalism. The Vienna School art historian Alois Riegl believed that “the human hand fashions work from lifeless matter according to the same formal principles as nature does. All art production (*Kunstschaffen*) is therefore at heart nothing other than a contest (*Wettschaffen*) with nature.”² If we suppose that Riegl’s historical definition is still relevant, and if we think of today’s triumphant capitalism as the technological ambient of our global world and thus something akin to the third nature, then we can see rather than competing with natural forms, why contemporary art has put itself in direct competition with capitalist power as described by Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler – not as a mere economic system but a fuller system for measurement and accumulation of power into capital.³ Art as the confusing aesthetics of the exercise of power is best evidenced in the current epoch, which can be claimed to have started with the 2017 edition of Whitney Biennial and Hannah Black’s unsuccessful attempt at removing the *Open Casket* painting by Dana Schutz from the exhibition.⁴ This event marks the emergence of a public process by artists and other art professionals playing a direct role in assigning or taking away power and prestige from specific artists and institutions. This phenomenon, later categorized under the term “cancel culture”, while dividing the global art world, has also been a driving force behind both the shifting of the emphasis from art and its function to the pure power politics of art and a sign of the demise of the pre-pandemic art paradigm.

Suppose “cancel culture” is one side of the art as a form of specific knowledge that is being replaced by the instrumentalization of a power play in the art world. In that case, the other side of this phenomenon would be the return of the speculative art market and its digital children, NFTs, which in their own way shift the emphasis from art to the exercise of a power to generate capital.

If for the sake of power and capital, the art world abandons art, its actual *raison d’être*, the human need for art has to find fulfilment in other places or times. The change of sensibility resulting from isolation, the strange yet scientific nature of the pandemic, and our heightened interaction with the digital world have fuelled a new desire for science fiction. A typical route for figuring out a way out from our doomed present time to any future is by way of fantasy. Even though the existing science-fiction landscape is often stuck with a humanoid and carbonic future imagination, representing a parochial view of future art, it is still one of the only art forms that promise creativity in general and art specifically. After all, the retro-futuristic pastiche of science-fiction, its use of sampling and reaggregation to build virtuals out of permutations of the actual, showcases

the core of Goodman’s “worldmaking” thesis: that every new world is a remake of the old worlds.⁵

At the centre of any predictive aesthetic speculation is the dialectical movement of history, its cyclical fashions, ‘waves’ of recapitulation — sequential minimization and maximization, retraction and expansion, the Classical and the Baroque. A serious imagination of futural artworks needs to consider, even parametrize statistically, this structure of trendsetting, these underground movements of dispensing and reappropriation. If fashion is an influx, nevertheless it requires a free exchange of information, a conversation at the level of performative appearances. The pandemic blocked this natural flow, reconfiguring the references and inclinations of art by way of carefully defined channels of digital conversations, social media architectures, and the software design we already had in place when Covid broke out.

Accordingly, what used to make up the social value of art then quickly shifts to minor cultural forms. A direction for future art away from the art world, fuelled by smartphones and the habit of multitasking, seems to be TikTok and Instagram Reels as multi-pocket cinemas of the everyday. The digitalization of exhibitions, which brings physical art infrastructures to online environments, is simultaneous to the “exhibitionalization” of the digital, where the *habitus* online environments are finally recognized as art practices. In this sense, Facebook’s overhyped Metaverse also claims to be offering a new world in which art may occur.

Four Scenarios

Art’s engine is fuelled by the love-hate relationship it maintains throughout history with culture. Art arises as a force from within culture to challenge it, only to then lose its heat by becoming part of what it had previously taken to task. This way, we can guess that the post-pandemic art world will be shaped by four major trends whose roots are already spreading around the actual sites where art and culture continue their dialectical relationship:

1. Algorithmic curation and predictive expectation:

In this scenario, curators will be replaced by machines, and humans will be fortified to act as genuine producers of a kind of art that challenges and stands out of what is accepted as culture. Excellent examples of this trend are streaming platforms like Spotify. While most of the actual music of Spotify is produced by humans, its circulation and juxtaposition are decided automatically by algorithms. The listener’s access is gatekept by a form of intelligence that filters an almost infinite amount of content. In the long term, this trend means that the fashion waves of art are not spontaneous anymore, since they are inscribed as morphemes by the algorithm’s operation (that might even be directly controlled by an interested party): in an algorithmic territory, no encounter is random.

2. Artificial intelligence and predictive composition:

In this scenario, we face the opposite case from above. While curators carry out creation and are essentially human mediators, the actual artmaking is either automated or performed by machines. The perfect example of this trend is the endless supply of photos provided by stock images websites, or the endless supply of songs provided by music li-

barians. These exist autonomously, but can only turn into meaningful objects through human selection and ‘magnetization’. Another example could be the creations of GAN and GPT3, where only a (human) nuanced arbitration and conceptual innovation can prevent the art from becoming kitsch. Perhaps one could compare the state of political and socially engaged art to this scenario in which an endless supply of faceless artists provide the right political content for curators with a theme searching for the right content to fit in their exhibitions.

3. Technological formalism:

In this scenario, art becomes exchangeable with high tech engineering. This is a trend already visible in exhibitions like the Immersive Van Gogh across cities in the United States and Europe, the newly opened James Turrell exhibition at Kraftwerk Berlin, or Dark Matter’s permanent installation. These new approaches in the production of popular art seem anti-virtual and anti-screen, providing an ample physical space in which the artwork is realized. These artworks are site-exclusive as they require a particular embodiment of the spectator in a specific environment. In this type of work, the interface is what matters, and there is an impossibility to create art objects on your own. Each piece is an accomplishment of engineering. None of them could have been possible without involving a heavy dose of algorithmic technologies, or a giant mechanical apparatus, or an explicit effort of scientific exploration. Taken to its extreme, this is the art fair as the invention fair or the amusement park, with artworks becoming monumental toys for sensible impact.

4. Technocapital as meaning:

In this scenario, the truth of art can only be achieved by way of technology. NFTs and other blockchain contracts assume the role of enforcers of metaphysical realities and patrimonials of art’s significance. This is the full fetishization of consumption, the full amalgamation of object and desire, as neither the content nor the form of the artwork matters anymore. Art is a financial asset and a tribal sign for displaying distinction and converging to a sense of belonging. In this case, the question should be: isn’t that what the commercial art world always was? If the answer to this question is yes, then by lowering its interests or severing its relationship to the knowledge market of art consisting of curation and academia, the art world operations can be infused with NFTs, clearing a mutually sustainable world, materializing the virtual realm and vice versa.

The Impact on Artistic Labour

The spending by governments and NGOs on art is a form of welfare or social services designed for a profession whose practitioners are required to have a high level of education without any kind of a guarantee about sustainable income or job after professionalization. This is why, from the standpoint of artistic labour, the first two scenarios spell out nothing but further marginalization of artists and independent curators as wage earners. While the NGO and governmental budgets shrink, these institutions will choose automation and algorithms as a way of balancing their funds and saving the lost income.

In the second and third scenarios, the unsuccessful artists, those who are unable to make the transition to commercial galleries and NFT environments, will have to either exit the art profession or will already have made the move to another job while keep-

ing a part-time art practice. In the case of savvy and market-friendly artists, those who are in the process of transitioning to the commercial side of the art world will join the petit bourgeois class and will increasingly see themselves not as labourers but as business owners managing a brand made up of their own name and practice.

But is there any future for art at all? Maybe art will be just the continual repetition of the same. Maybe it is unequivocally doomed. What's the role of art in a social media dominated world, where the labour of content is ubiquitous? What's the role of art in the face of the pandemic's metaphorical end of the world? It seems clear that art wasn't up to the task so far. It just disappeared, it stopped with the social world instead of offering ways out of its decay. Art failed beautifully.

The optimistic alternative, in which biennales are eagerly betting on, is that the museum will rise as a space for making the future, for research into art as a vessel for pragmatic concerns and for the implementation of the hyperstitional drives of artist's inventive cosmologies. For any real change to come from art, though, it would require a lot of money and a lot of trust from the established systems of organization. In all truth, we are now at the opposite side of the deal: art has never been so widely ridiculed, even by the elites themselves.

The more pessimistic view implies otherwise: the extinction of public art and the emergence of an art of and for extinction (of Earth and of art itself). Here lies an art without spectators, without its own world so to say. In this case, the art world would become only an accessory to everlasting cultural warfare. Artworks would just be pedagogical tools in a space of conflict for hegemony and voice, for the control of public discourse.

Yet even in the worst scenario, there is a way by which technocultural developments follow onwards without us, irrespective of our personal feelings, a way by which a speciation of artistic-cultural objects happens just like the speciation of natural beings. In the next hundred years, there will be new integrations between body and art, body and visage, body and landscape, for example, that will turn any of these predictions on their heads. If art is the bio-externalization of worldviews, as a synthesization of Riegl and Stiegler would suggest, there might be a final stage of disembodied art, a future organology that is completely symbiotic with Artificial General Intelligence: a sort of art that stirs away from the imitation of different orders of nature as a worldview and into the imitation of *Zeitgeist* itself.

¹ Blaise Pascal, 'Pensees,' available online: <https://www.buboquote.com/en/quote/5244-pascal-all-man-s-misfortune-consists-in-this-one-thing-his-inability-to-remain-quietly-in-one>

² Riegl, Alois. *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*. Translated by Jacqueline E. Jung. NY: Zone Books, 2004.

³ Bichler, Shimshon, and Jonathan Nitzan. "Capital as power: Toward a new cosmology of capitalism." *real-world economics review* 61 (2012): 65-84.

⁴ Beauchamp, Gorman. "Open Casket and Cultural Appropriation." *The Antioch Review* 75.4 (2017): 455-465.

⁵ Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Hackett Publishing, 1978.

System of Reveries

Система Грёз

ГРЁЗЫ-ПАРОВОЗЫ

Как практиковать децентрализованное и неконкурентное распределение ресурсов?

REVERIES-LOCOMOTIVES

How to practice decentralized and noncompetitive resource distribution?

ДЕНЕЖНЫЕ/НЕДЕНЕЖНЫЕ АЛТЕРНАТИВНЫЕ ЭКОНОМИКИ

- ++++ Шеринг доступных ресурсов и взаимопомощь внутри художественного сообщества
- ++++ Создание альтернативных экономических отношений
- ++++ Летучие сети договоренностей и распределенной инфраструктуры

ДЕЦЕНТРАЛИЗОВАННАЯ ИНФРАСТРУКТУРА, ПОДДЕРЖИВАЮЩАЯ ЖИЗНЬ ХУДОЖЕСТВЕННОГО СОБЩЕСТВА

ВАРИАНТ 1. ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ ЧУЖОЙ, УЖЕ ИМЕЮЩЕЙСЯ ИНФРАСТРУКТУРЫ

- ++++ «Канализация на СДЭК»: договоренность о том, что 5% всех перевозок логистической компании выполняются в интересах культурных работников
- ++++ «Коллаборация с бухгалтерскими муниципальными депутатами»: использование муниципальных активов для фестивалей, резиденций и иных форм взаимодействия культурных работников с местными жителями

ВАРИАНТ 2. СТРОИТЕЛЬСТВО СОБСТВЕННОЙ ИНФРАСТРУКТУРЫ: ОБЩИЕ МАТЕРИАЛЬНЫЕ ОБЪЕКТЫ

- ++++ Сеть пространств в разных городах для выставок путешествующих культурных работников
- ++++ Сеть складов для хранения художественных работ в разных городах
- ++++ «Собственный Петрович» — транспорт для перевозки художественных работ

ВАРИАНТ 3. ПИРАТСКИЕ СЕТИ

- ++++ ...
- ++++ ...
- ++++ ...

ДЕЦЕНТРАЛИЗОВАННАЯ СИСТЕМА (ПЕРЕ)РАСПРЕДЕЛЕНИЯ РЕСУРСОВ

- ++++ 3% гонорара, который выплачивает крупные институции, идет на поддержку независимой инфраструктуры
- ++++ Основать фонд, аккумулирующий и перераспределяющий средства от других фондов и институций, ориентированный на создание устойчивых условий программной работы — базового дохода, оплаты аренды, коммунальных платежей и других системообразующих вещей

MONETARY/NON-MONETARY ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIES

- ++++ Sharing of available resources and mutual assistance within the art community
- ++++ Development of alternative economic relations
- ++++ Volatile networks of arrangements and distributed infrastructure

DECENTRALIZED INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORTING THE LIFE OF THE ART COMMUNITY

OPTION 1. USING SOMEONE ELSE'S/ EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE

- ++++ "Squatting on EDCS": an agreement that 5% of all transportation carried out by logistics companies like EDCS is made in the interests of cultural workers
- ++++ Collaboration with friendly municipal deputies: using municipal assets for festivals, residencies, and other forms of interaction between cultural workers and local residents

OPTION 2. BUILDING YOUR OWN INFRASTRUCTURE: SHARED MATERIAL OBJECTS

- ++++ A network of spaces in different cities to provide a crash pad for traveling cultural workers
- ++++ A network of warehouses in different cities for storing artworks
- ++++ "Our own Petrovich": transport for moving artworks

OPTION 3. PIRATE NETWORKS

- ++++ ...
- ++++ ...
- ++++ ...

DECENTRALIZED SYSTEM OF (RE) DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

- ++++ 3% of the royalties paid by large institutions go toward the maintenance of independent infrastructure
- ++++ Create a fund that would accumulate and redistribute funds from other funds and institutions, focusing on the development of stable conditions for programmatic work, including basic income, rent payments, utility bills, and other strategic issues

ГРЁЗЫ-УГРОЗЫ

Как защищаться, иметь доступ к речи и действовать солидарно?

REVERIES-THREATS

How to defend oneself, have access to speech and act in solidarity?

- ++++ Муза забастовки. Просвещает работников об их правах, поддерживает боевой дух, помогает организовывать забастовки, неприкосновенна
- ++++ Крестная мажор района. Грозит преследованиями

WE DEMAND

- ++++ The removal of restrictions on collective actions
- ++++ The right for representatives of the art community to make collective deals with representatives of institutions at the level of profession and region
- ++++ Compliance with minimum wage requirements (including civil and internship contracts)
- ++++ Recognition of the right to strike as a constitutional right of citizens and permission for the announcement of strikes at the level of profession and region

ГРЁЗЫ-САХАРОЗЫ

Как поддерживать жизнь сообщества и заботиться?

REVERIES-SACCHAROSES

How to support the life of the community and to care for it?

- ++++ Переосмыслить и признать ценность труда воспроизводства
- ++++ Сохранить баланс между ценностью потребления жизни и невозможным пространством производства искусства: меньше заботы, чем производства смысла
- ++++ Заботиться об отдыхе — как коллективном, так и индивидуальном
- ++++ Хвататься не переробками, а количеством опыта
- ++++ Практиковать гостеприимство: создавать дружественные среды, делиться доступными ресурсами, развивать связи и связность внутри сообщества
- ++++ Организовывать образовательные инициативы в разных городах и поощрять их финансовую поддержку

MORE ROOM FOR EXPERIMENTATION!

БОЛЬШЕ ПРОСТРАНСТВА ДЛЯ ЭКСПЕРИМЕНТА!

И хлеба и пост

ГРЁЗЫ-СИМБИОЗЫ

Как создавать коалиции и менять баланс сил?

REVERIES-SYMBIOSES

How to build coalitions and change the balance of power?

- Сотрудничать:
 - ++++ с маргинализованными сообществами
 - ++++ с самоорганизованными инициативами
 - ++++ с городскими сообществами
 - ++++ с НКО
- ЧПБОБЫ:
 - a) не быть изолированными в художественной среде
 - b) перепроверять зону публичного
 - v) коллективно искать решения
 - g) преобразовывать общие проблемы

- ++++ Спринт сеть солидарной медийной поддержки, в составе входят крупные и малые СМИ, культурные институции и творческие работники
- ++++ Создавать профессиональные союзы и альянсы культурных работников из разных городов
- ++++ Взаимодействовать с бухгалтерскими муниципальными депутатами для укрепления связей и децентрализации культурной событийности

Грёзы-кометы — озарения, неоптимальные видения лучшего устройства системы искусства. Ядро кометы — вопрос, основанный на потребностях. Ее хвост — шлейф решений. Мы предлагаем ввер варианты, открытые и дополненные, из них можно собрать подходящие прототипы перемен.

Reveries-comets are indistinct visions of better organization of the art system. The comet's nucleus is a needs-based question. Its tail is the trail of decisions. We offer a range of options that can be supplemented, from which suitable prototypes of change can be assembled.

Внимание! Грёзы взаимосвязаны и обуславливают исполнение друг друга. Нам принципиально важны связи между сообществами, стремление к децентрализации и устранение конкурентных отношений. Мы против борьбы за ресурсы и соперничества, мы хотим не выживать, а цвести повсюду!

Attention! The reveries are interconnected and condition the fulfillment of each other. Networks between communities, the desire for decentralization, and the elimination of competitive relationships are fundamentally important to us. We are against the struggle for resources and rivalry. We want to prosper everywhere, not survive!

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Radical Reveries

THE PROJECT RADICAL REVERIES WAS CREATED WITH THE SUPPORT OF GARAGE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART (MOSCOW) FOR THE EXHIBITION ASSUMING DISTANCE: SPECULATIONS, FOLKS, AND PREDICTIONS IN THE AGE OF THE CORONACENE, 2021

ПРОЕКТ «РАДИКАЛЬНЫЕ ГРЁЗЫ» СОЗДАН ПРИ ПОДДЕРЖКЕ МУЗЕЯ СОВРЕМЕННОГО ИСКУССТВА «ГАРЖ» (МОСКВА) ДЛЯ ВЫСТАВКИ «ВЫБОРЫ ДИСТАНЦИИ: СПЕКУЛЯЦИИ, ЛЮДИ, ПРОГНОЗЫ В ЭПОХУ КОРОНАЦЕНА», 2021

ГРЁЗЫ-МЕТАМОРФОЗЫ

Как трансформировать систему?

REVERIES-METAMORPHOSES

How to transform the system?

- ++++ Создавать и тиражировать более чувствительные и сложные логики взаимодействия, доводить хрупкие внутренние коды до статуса новой нормы
- ++++ Выработать протоколы взаимодействия с институциями, сформулировать требования для того, чтобы действовать консиглированно
- ++++ Терзаться значимой тематикой, бороться за смыслы
- ++++ Оптимизировать недовольства и визуализировать будущее
- ++++ Выстраивать и поддерживать модель культуры, которая несет не удовлетворение, а критический потенциал
- ++++ Не использовать искусство как фасад или декорацию на периферии государственного-частного партнерства, а в эпицентре публичного поля
- ++++ Создавать независимые органы, художественные советы, медирующие решения вопросов о поддержке культурного (в)с/производства
- ++++ Децентрализовать потоки ресурсов
- ++++ Увеличить финансирование институций за пределами Москвы
- ++++ Наставлять на важности местного самоуправления

ГРЁЗЫ-ГИПНОЗЫ

Как соблазнять идеями?

REVERIES-HYPNOSES

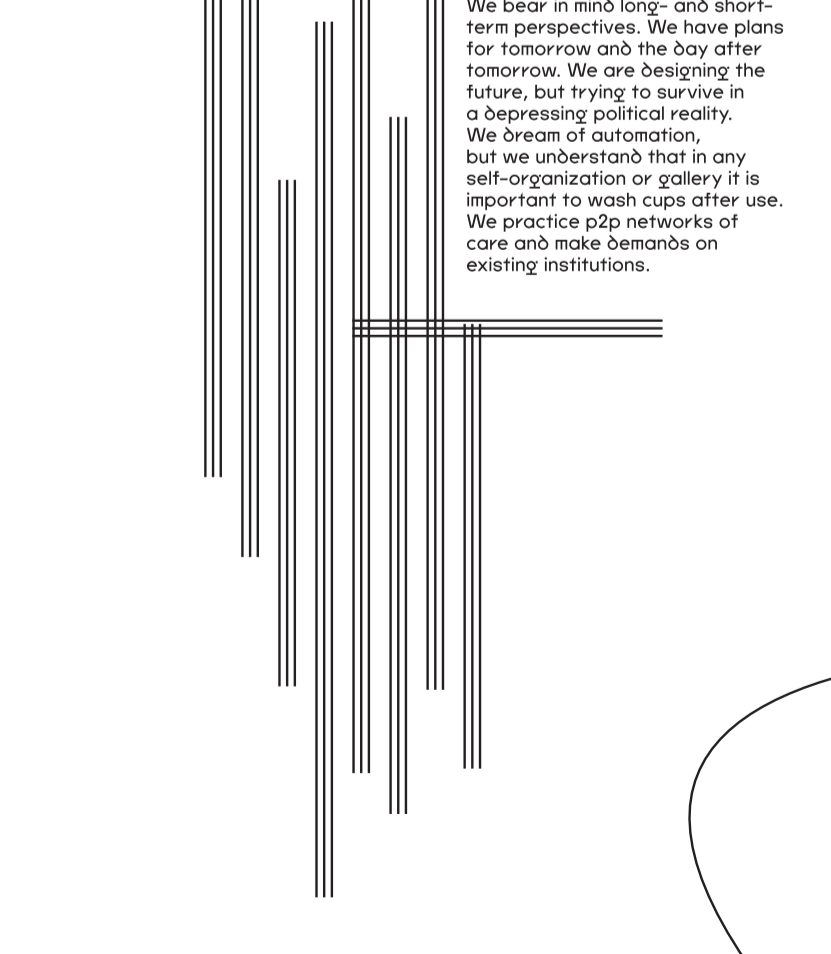
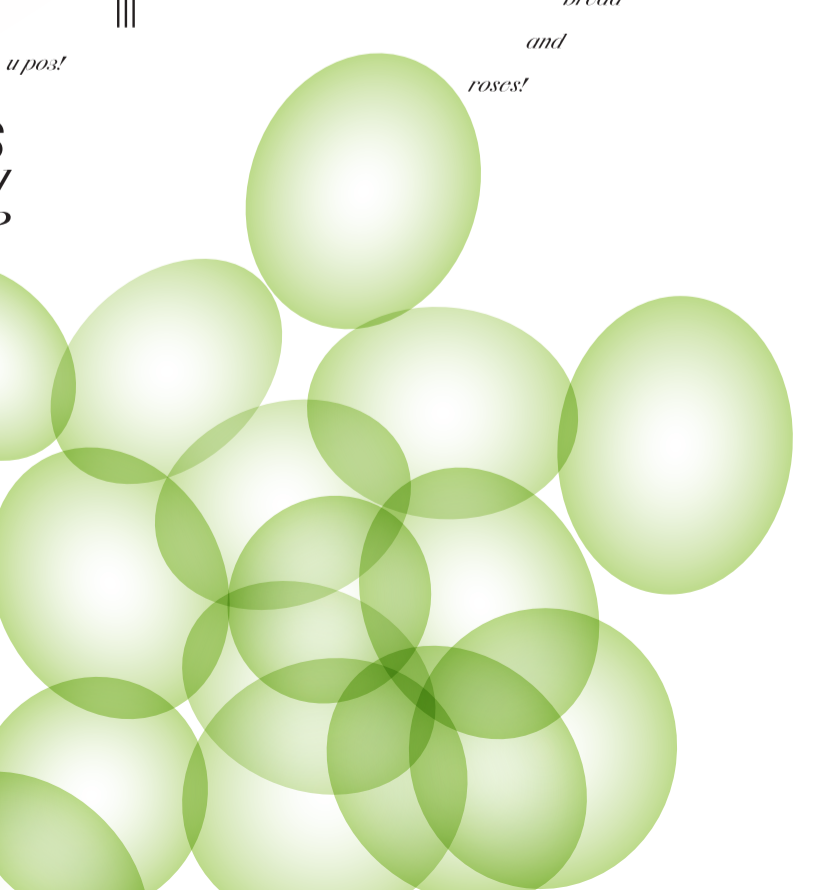
How to seduce with ideas?

КАК МЫ ПОЛИТИЗИРУЕМ, ЧТО МЫ ЧУВСТВУЕМ ПРИ ЭТОМ И НЕ УМИРАЕМ ЛИ МЫ ОТ ЭТОГО?

- Будущее — зона радикальной привлекательности, нужно создавать его образы
- Спринт нахвата, медовый, инклюзивные и гостеприимные пространства
- Находить точки соприкосновения с людьми в разных частях идеологического спектра
- Подвергать сомнению сложившиеся представления и границы, показывать возможность их пересборки
- Обращаться с опытом как с источником политического
- Пропагандировать опыт, солидарность, взаимоподдержку, уважение к раннему труду
- Выдавать путевки и санатории

HOW DO WE POLITICIZE, WHAT DO WE FEEL, WHILE DOING IT, AND DARE WE NOT DYE FROM THIS?

- The future is a zone of radical attractiveness, we need to create its images
- Build inviting, grassroots, inclusive and welcoming spaces
- Find common ground with people from different points on the ideological spectrum
- Question established ideas and boundaries, reveal the possibility of their reassembly
- Treat experience as a source of the political
- Promote recreation, solidarity, mutual respect for different types of labor
- Issue vouchers to sanatoriums



Contributors

Alphabet Collection is an artist collective made up of Mohammad Salemy and a changing cast of collaborators. It functions as a platform for ongoing research and practice in text and art production in a time of rising complexity and artificial intelligence.

Anna Ehrenstein was born in Germany to Albanian parents & works in transdisciplinary artistic practice. The main focus of her work is thinking about the perspective and material culture of the periphery, networked images and ecologies.

Corina L. Apostol is the curator of the Tallinn Art Hall, Estonia. Previously she was the Andrew W. Mellon Fellow at Creative Time, where she co-edited *Making Another World Possible* (Routledge, 2019). She is the co-founder of ArtLeaks and Editor-in-Chief of the *ArtLeaks Gazette*.

Dorian Batycka is a curator and art writer based in between Europe, Canada and Dubai. His writing can be found in *Hyperallergic*, *CoinDesk*, *Decrypt*, *Artnet News*, *The Art Newspaper* and others, where he covers everything from the trials and tribulations of the art market, cultural politics and issues ranging from censorship to restoration, heritage and technology.

Dmitry Vilensky is an artist, writer, and founding member of Chto Delat?/What is to be done?, a platform of cultural workers initiated in 2003 at the intersection of political theory, art and activism.

Federico Geller (Argentina/Berlin) studied and taught Biologic Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires. He is a member of Abriendo Caminos/La comunitaria TV, a collective which endeavours to create communication tools (video, interventions, graphic material) for grass-roots political work and conjuncture situations.

Kafe-Morozhenoe is a media activist collective founded by Nastya Dmitrievskaya and Daria Iuriichuk in 2020. *Kafe-Morozhenoe* questions labour conditions in art, academia, and activism in the post-Soviet region and aims to raise awareness of precarity in the community by collecting and sharing information, conducting research, maintaining direct actions.

Maria Helen Känd is a freelance curator and art journalist. Among others, she writes for *edasi.org* and hosts a short art review on *Vikerraadio* at Estonian Public Broadcasting.

Mike Watson (PhD from Goldsmiths College) is a theorist, critic and curator who is principally focused on the relation between culture, new media and politics. In 2021 his

third book, *The Memeing of Mark Fisher: How the Frankfurt School Foresaw Capitalist Realism and What to do About it*, came out with Zero Books.

Mohammad Salemy is an independent Berlin-based artist, critic and curator from Canada. He holds a BFA from Emily Carr University and an MA in Critical Curatorial Studies from the University of British Columbia. His writings have been published in *e-flux*, *Flash Art*, *Third Rail*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Ocula*, *Camera Austria*, *Arts of the Working Class* and *Spike*.

Rena Rädle & Vladan Jeremić are artists who explore the relation between art and politics, developing transformative potentials of art in the context of social struggles. Vladan is the co-founder of ArtLeaks and editor of the *ArtLeaks Gazette*.

Rômulo Moraes is a Brazilian writer, sound artist and ethnographer. He is editor of *É&É& Journal* and author of *Casulos* (Kotter, 2019).

Róna Kopeczky is an art historian and curator based in Budapest. She joined the acb Gallery Budapest in the quality of artistic director in the beginning of 2015 and is the co-founder of *Easttopics*, a platform dedicated to Eastern European art life. Róna holds a PhD degree in art history from the Paris IV – Sorbonne University.

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Vida Knežević is an art historian, curator, co-founder of Kontekst collective and co-editor of *Mašina.rs*, an online portal dedicated to the production of social critique.

ZIP group is an art group, created in 2009 in Krasnodar. ZIP is the founder of the Krasnodar Institute of Contemporary Art (KICA), the independent festival of street art CAN, the art residence Pyatikhatki and co-founder of the Krasnodar Centre for Contemporary Art Typography.



ARTLEAKS

<http://art-leaks.org>