

NOTES ON CURATORIAL ARTISTIC PRACTICES AT THE INTERSECTION OF ART AND POLITICS

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Jaroslav Supek, "I slept under the photos of those killed in the wars in Ex-Yugoslavia" (re-enactment) and Alma Suljević during her performance, "Holy warriorress", Exhibition *I will never talk about the war again*, Färgfabriken, Stockholm 2011.

As cultural and political workers we understand our curatorial and artistic practice as taking place at the points of intersection of art and politics. For us, it is crucial to produce critical knowledge and to support artistic practices that are not explicitly oriented towards the art market, galleries and institutional systems or towards the capitalist agendas of banks and foundations. We support practices that aim to have an impact on the socio-political reality. Through the emission of audio-visual representations certain changes of the socio-political reality can be achieved or it can be influenced. The emission of representations can be seen as a kind of "aggression" towards potential recipients. Each representation that is articulated by a societal political consensus (the media) or by a societal esthetic normative (the art) contains

quality, intensity and other characteristics. In this respect it is crucial to consider with which policy this "aggressive" representation is mediated (or rather transformed) and if it contains certain use value in favor of the commons that could "legitimize" its existence. Exactly in the societal political mediation of the representations placed by the art producer and in their transformation lies the crucial aspect of the curatorial practice.



"On use value of art", exhibition at Roma Cultural Center in Leskovac, Serbia, 2009 (top).
 "On use value of art", exhibition at Babel Art Space, Trondheim, Norway, 2010 (bottom).



Nikolay Oleynikov, "The years of the bonecrusher queen", wall painting.
 Exhibition *I will never talk about the war again*, Färgfabriken, Stockholm 2011.

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 See Karl Marx, *Capital*,
 Volume 1, Part I:
 Commodities and Money,
 available online at
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-cl/ch01.htm#s1>

Of importance for our work is the definition of the societal role and the use value of art. The term "use value" should be understood in the sense of Marx's definitions of value and his distinction between use value and exchange value.¹ In the case of artistic production, use value can serve the commons in terms of the production of emancipatory politics of knowledge. Use value can be observed in contrast to the exchange value (i.e. the price that an art product generates on the art market). In times of economical crisis, financial speculation on artworks becomes especially evident. We witness that banks, companies and the super-rich invest in gold, pink diamonds and contemporary art. Shortage, uniqueness and economic growth are some of the concepts of capitalism that raise the price of the art product and makes its exclusivity sustainable. The exchange of art works produces profit and symbolical capital and art transforms into a means for maintenance or acquisition of social status of the ruling class and becomes itself commodity and fetish.

Being active in both fields makes our practice not exclusively artistic or curatorial, as understood by dominant mainstream work relations and hierarchies. The focus is rather on the transformation of socio-political reality and not on formalist results, quantity and curatorial branding. This is why the market has problems to recognize those results that could not be easily consumed.

At first glance there might seem to be a difference between socially engaged curatorial practice and other curatorial practices. Every public activity has a reflection in the field of politics and appears therefore as socially engaged practice. Politically non-engaged curatorial approach doesn't exist. This leads us to the question, what kind of politics a certain curatorial and artistic practice represents and promotes? The political field is defined by a political concept, by the conditions of the curators engagement and economy of production. We clearly support leftist emancipatory politics through our work. Obviously a more common model today is the promotion of neoliberal right-wing politics in curatorial practice that is shaped and controlled by the ruling class. The usual way is to source art pieces for biennials and big exhibitions on loan from private galleries or collections, often without involving the artist in the exhibition process. This kind of curatorial practice is similar to shopping of luxury goods and the following promotion of the purchases.

The method of production of the artworks or exhibitions, as well as the context within which the artworks are presented are crucial for conceptualizing our working strategy. This becomes especially important when curatorial and art projects are dealing with burning social issues and are relevant for broader social contexts. An artist dealing with social themes, depicting misery, investigating in-

justice or other socio-political issues stays in compliance with the questioned condition if he/she focuses on creating exchange value only. If there is no use value in favor of the commons in such kind of artistic production, it stays "politically passive", a sheer exploitation of conditions other people suffer from and the consumption of such art in the worst case becomes a cynical act of fetishism. In previous working processes we have initiated methodologies and infrastructures for a use value production in arts, and some of the following postulates were stressed: producer and recipient are not distinguished, the participants in the process are related reciprocally, that means they are producers and recipients/users of the work at the same time. It is the qualitative aspect of value that meets the concrete needs of human beings, the value that can change and expand our everyday lives, the value in favor of the commons.

We have tried to develop such methodologies in our project "On use value of art" (2009–2010)², a production and exhibitions of works done in collaboration with activists, artists, youths and organizations about the situation of youth and migrants in Serbia, France and Germany. The collaborative way of production was part of the initial concept.³

Artist and activist from France Ivan Basso worked with unaccompanied minors living on the streets of Paris and made photos and a video questioning the ethics of youth protection, André Raatzsch and Emese Benkö developed a sound sculpture with youths in Berlin, of a fictional Roma female superhero. Sibylle Hoffer from Berlin worked in the city of Leskovac in South Serbia and realized staged photo-portraits. The works were exhibited in many different places, sometimes on the initiative of the young people in their schools, sometimes by the activist associations or in art spaces. The photographs of Sibylle Hoffer were for the first time exhibited in the Roma Cultural Center in Leskovac, a unique public institution in Serbia, established by the local Roma community during socialism. Ivan Basso made an exhibition in a Parisian organization that works with street children.

Often contemporary artworks don't formulate a message that could engage the public beyond the art professionals into knowledge production. The question arises, if the curator or artist have this intention at all. Usual practice shows a more "hermetic" piece of art and supports it by another, more context-related one. Biennialization and festivalization are pushing art practitioners to avoid a didactic approach and to be satisfied with involving a few site-specific or contextual artworks. In contrary we insist on presenting artworks which are clearly didactic and try to involve the audience in a learning process. For the exhibition "I will never talk about the war again" in Stockholm's Färgfabriken (2011)⁴ and in Kibla in Maribor, Slovenia (2012)⁵ – that focuses on critical social analysis and testimonies of violence and trauma connected with recent wars in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, with works from artists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia and Russia – we invited artist from Moscow Nikolay Oleynikov to produce a mural installation based on a historical timeline of the destruction of Yugoslavia. Providing the political and historical context, the mentioned artwork became a didactic tool for reading the exhibition, pointing to the causes of war generated by neoliberal capitalism's ideology.

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	Rena Rädle and Vladan Jeremi, <i>On Use Value of Art</i> , exhibition catalogue, Babel Art Space, Trondheim, Norway, 2010. http://www.birobeograd.info/pdf/On_Use_Value_of_Art.pdf	Vladan Jeremi and Elsa Ekessiöö Thambert, <i>Psychosis part I–I will never talk about the war again</i> , exhibition catalogue, Färgfabriken, Stockholm, Sweden, 2011. http://www.fargfabriken.se/en/archive/item/download/71_96c7443fd7fe3d044ea123c3a26d9a31	Kibla, announcement of the exhibition "I will never talk about the war again", Maribor, Slovenia, 2012: http://www.kibla.org/en/news/news/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=1849&tx_ttnews[backPid]=1&Hash=535f55ce37
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	About the problems of collaboration and "participatory practices" we have written elsewhere: http://www.rueckkopplungen.de/?cat=48		ArtLeaks, "It is time to break the silence!": http://art-leaks.org/about/

Working conditions in neoliberal capitalism are the main problem, and brought individuals and institutions into a precarious situation with the lack of stable funding. It seems that the current position is hard to keep and this will sooner or later lead to the abolition of transparent public institutional spaces for art and culture. On the other hand, there are the "successful" private institutions, promotional projects of private collections and banks that have replaced the public institutions from the times of the welfare system, promoting corporate social responsibility instead of the commons.

The rich and the art collectors must not be the ones that lead the trend. On the other hand, independent cultural practice without alternative economy is not sustainable and cannot have a strong impact. We need a network of economic self-help that can secure a stable position for cultural workers. Establishing an international union of cultural workers could be a relevant step. Insisting on economic democracy is a good point. A recent example of an initiative formed to fight against the abuse of cultural workers' professional integrity and the open infraction of their labor rights is the platform ArtLeaks⁶, established by international cultural workers.