

IGOR ZABEL ASSOCIATION FOR CULTURE AND THEORY

ART AS COMMITMENT

International conference

Saturday, December 7, 2013

Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova, Maistrova 3, Ljubljana

The conference is organized by the **Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory** in cooperation with the **Moderna galerija**. The conference is supported by the **ERSTE Foundation**.

Abstracts and short biographies

Keti Chukhrov: No Art, Without Sublation of Art

The dichotomy of committed and autonomous art preserved its viability as long as the theories of the avant-garde remained valid for contemporary art. Such a *a priori* viability of the avant-gardes was conditioned by the belief in the unmediated political and social impact of art, by the capacity of both – political activism and artistic practice – to be political agents. This standpoint had its grounds: aesthetic avant-gardes were seen as inseparable from the political ones; but since the end of the 1980s, the idea of art's impact on the social sphere has gradually become an imaginary. At present, contemporary art as well as its institutions happen to be in crisis after realizing that their political power is collapsing. On the other hand, the indigestible modernist object is also not viable: such objects are not produced any more. They are impossible after minimalism and conceptualism. Meanwhile, social engineering is often accomplished in the frame of cognitive capitalism much more effectively than in art, so that the emancipatory interventions of engaged art, with its ardent rhetoric of anti-capitalism, are just part of it. So then perhaps contemporary art – in both of its forms, engaged and autonomous – should reveal and even claim its own capitalist unconscious and declare its demise, as Hegel once declared art's demise. This would then again generate the terrain with no art at all. But that would no longer be a quasi-avant-garde sublation of art but rather the self-rejection of an institute. And then the question is: what could this terrain of no art be about?

Keti Chukhrov (Moscow, Russia) is an art theorist and philosopher. and holds PhD in Comparative Literature and Doc. Habil. in philosophy. She is an associate professor in the Department of Art Theory and Cultural Studies at the Russian State University for the Humanities and a head of theory department at the National Center for Contemporary Art. Since 2003 she has served on the editorial board of *Moscow Art Magazine*. Chukhrov has authored numerous texts on art theory, culture, politics, and philosophy which have appeared in periodicals such as, among others: *Afterall*, *Artforum*, *Brumaria*, *documenta magazine*, *e-flux journal*, *New Literary Review*, and *Springerin*. Her full-length books include: *To Be – To Perform. 'Theatre' in Philosophical Criticism of Art* (2011); *Pound & £* (1999), and two volumes of dramatic poetry: *Just Humans* (2010) and *War of Quantities* (2004). Chukhrov lives and works in Moscow.

Miklavž Komelj: Text as Explosion: Djuna Barnes' *The Antiphon*

The title of the conference *Art as Commitment* can also be read as a point of departure for criticism of the notion "committed art". Matej Bor, the author of the first book of revolutionary poetry that emerged from the Yugoslavian Partisan movement during the Second World War, *Previharimo viharje (Overstorm the Storms)*, has commented on this notion as follows: "And yet – were my 'Storms' 'committed' poetry at all? I think, they were an explosion." In this sense, my paper will explore another text connected with the Second World War that has been sometimes described as

an explosion as well (a nuclear explosion within the language, as T. S. Eliot put it), although in a completely different way: this text has the fame of being extremely obscure, illegible and “aristocratic”. Djuna Barnes’ play *The Antiphon* (1958, revised version 1962), stylistically reminiscent of the Elizabethan-Jacobean idiom, stages a family reunion in Gothic ruins at the beginning of the Second World War: the characters are confronted with each other and with their own innermost fantasies. Some interpretations proposed a reading of this play as criticism of patriarchal ideology and fascism – but they were not radical enough. A close examination of the play reveals the emerging of the patriarchal and fascist-like violence from out of the very strategies of supposed liberation and subversion (utopic project of the deceased Titus Higby Hobbs), which are reproducing the ideology they aim to subvert on account of leaving unquestioned the phantasmatic frame in which the project of “liberation” takes place. In order to evade such a reproduction of oppressive ideology, Barnes proposes an examination of the relationship between language and economy. The political gesture, as proposed in the play, is to stay confronted with “the utmost meridian and parallel” without any escape, in order to reveal the radical contingency of every necessity.

Miklavž Komelj (Ljubljana, Slovenia) is an art historian, poet and translator based in Ljubljana. He has published seven books of poetry, a collection of essays entitled *The Necessity of Poetry* (*Nujnost poezije*, 2010), and a study on art made by the partisans in World War II in Slovenia, *How to Think Partisan Art? (Kako misliti partizansko umetnost?)*, 2009). He has also published Slovene translations of works by Fernando Pessoa (2003, 2007), Pier Paolo Pasolini (2005, 2007), and César Vallejo (2011).

Hito Steyerl: The Rules of Engagement. What Are Artistic Rules of Engagement?

Hito Steyerl’s (Berlin, Germany) films and essays take the digital image as a point of departure for entering a world in which a politics of dazzle manifests as collective desire. This is to say that when war, genocide, capital flows, digital detritus and class warfare always take place partially within images, we are no longer dealing with the virtual but with a confusing and possibly alien concreteness that we are only beginning to understand. Today, the image world, Steyerl reminds us, is far from flat. And paradoxically, it may be in its most trashy and hollowed-out spots that we can locate its ethics. Because this is where forms run free and the altogether unseen and unrecognized toy with political projects at the speed of light. It is where spectacle and poverty merge, then split, then dance.

Ravi Sundaram: Art, Visual Politics and the Challenge of the Postcolonial Event

The citation of the “postcolonial” in Documenta 11 (2002, artistic director Okwui Enwezor) was followed by a period where art practices from Asia, Africa and Latin America set up a new visibility. Aided by new infrastructures of production, these art practices overlapped with the political-visual presence of the non-governmental sector. A decade later, the political challenges for postcolonial art are greater than ever, confronted with fragile sovereignties, media spectacles and the clutter of global event-scenes after Web 2.0. There is a new disturbing dramaturgy of visual politics today that postcolonial art practice has to deal with. I will be referring to the challenges posed by social-media-driven aesthetics for art practice, which is particularly strong in postcolonial worlds where the mobile phone is the main image/video-making tool in the hands of the many. In this presentation, I want to revisit the optico-political register of this domain, confronted with the claims of new event-scenes from Syria to India.

Ravi Sundaram (New Delhi, India) is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi, at which in 2000 he co-founded the Sarai programme. Sundaram has co-edited the *Sarai Reader* series, *The Public Domain* (2001), *The Cities of Everyday Life* (2002), *Shaping Technologies* (2003), *Crisis Media* (2004) and *Frontiers* (2007). He is the author of *Pirate Modernity: Media Urbanism in Delhi* (Routledge, London 2009) and *No Limits: Media Studies from India*, Oxford University Press (2013). Sundaram’s essays have been translated into various languages in India, Asia and Europe. His current research deals with urban fear after media modernity. He has been a visiting Professor at the School of Architecture and Planning, Delhi,

Princeton University, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and the University of Oxford.

Raluca Voinea: What Other Words for Commitment?

What other words for commitment? Generosity, dedication, modesty, consistence, honesty, free of strategic thinking, enthusiasm, candour, hope, humour, naivety, inexhaustibility of the capacity to start it all over again every day. How many artists or cultural workers do we actually find with all of these traits? In current times, this question could probably extend to the whole of humankind, with the exception of those affected by certain diseases/disabilities that allow them only a partial connection to reality.

Does being committed even matter these days? One talks about dissolution of borders, relativity of laws, irrelevance and oppression of traditions, multiplicity of myths and rituals, polyamory...

Commitment to traditional values (mostly associated with patriarchal and colonial societies, but not only) is definitely not even worth mentioning. Equality, fairness of chances, dignity, this set of equally universally recognized values, followed less and less in public policies and private economies all over the world, are the ones that usually come to mind when talking about committed art. What can artists actually do to serve these values? They can expose injustices, present contradictions, frame hypocrisies, criticize and imagine something better. Do they need to be artists to do this? Can they do this through the means of art in an equally meaningful way as if they were social workers, doctors, historians, psychotherapists, chemists? Why is it still that there is so much pressure on and expectations from artists to be committed? Are they really that powerful?

I will present some cases of art from Romania that I consider committed according to different standards, in different contexts and depending on who's judging – cases through which I justify my obsession with staying and working in this place, still. As a conclusion to my presentation, but not necessarily related to it, I will suggest a concrete proposition for the future. I have only talked about it in private so far, to a few friends. Nobody denied its legitimacy.

Raluca Voinea (Bucharest, Romania) is an art critic and curator based in Bucharest. Since 2012, she has been the co-director of tranzit.ro Association (a member of the tranzit.org network). She recently curated the exhibitions "We Were So Few and So Many of Us Are Left / Anca Benera & Arnold Estefan" and "Km. 0. Representations and Repetitions of the University Square", both in Bucharest. She is the curator of the Romanian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale with the project "An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale" by artists Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmuş. Since 2008, she has been the co-editor of *IDEA Arts + Society* magazine, published in Cluj, Romania. Voinea is especially interested in researching how contemporary art practice and artistic research enhances our common understanding of the social and political. In 2010, she was the recipient of an Igor Zabel Award working grant.