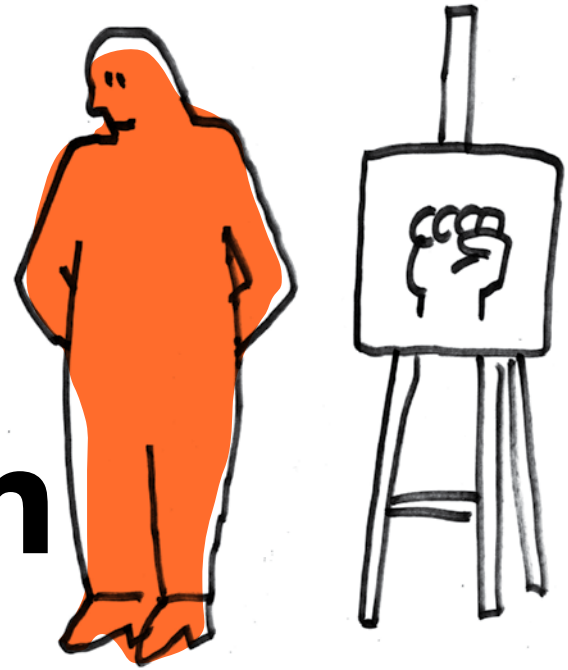
Who is an Artist?



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Barbora Kleinhamplová
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Steyerl, Groys, Berardi, Federici, Buden, Precarious Workers Brigade, Žmijewski, Stokfiszewski, Čto dělat', Bureau of Melodramatic Research

Kdo je to umělec?
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A2

Editorial note

Some of the interviews in this book have been previously published in the A2 bi-weekly cultural magazine.

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Introduction: The Artist as Paradigm

Tereza Stejskalová

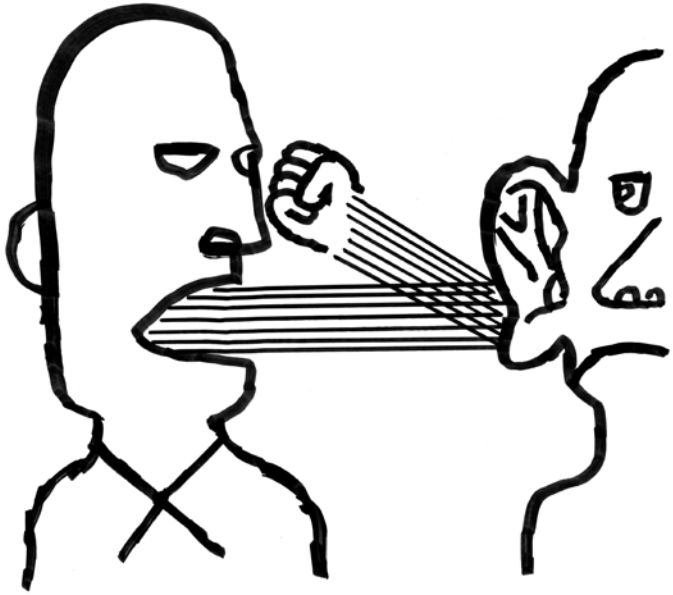
I.

Interviews are children of opportunity. Creatures of context and occasion, they are nonetheless ultimately the products of the artful edit: careful fictions, conjuring the promise of the actual from the signs of the present.[1]

The interview as a genre has become so ubiquitous it can be deemed a sign of our times. Though it emerged in the 19th century as a traditional journalistic genre[2], these days it respects no boundaries. We find it everywhere, from tabloid newspapers and lifestyle magazines, via more sophisticated periodicals for the elite, to specialist publications intended for a mere handful of experts. The interview is an entertaining, lively way of communicating information, whether this relate to the husband of a famous actress caught with his trousers down, or an interesting philosopher whose books are notoriously difficult to read because of their impenetrable jargon. What both these otherwise disparate figures have in common is the importance of their relationship to the unfolding present. The first is the husband of an actress whose fortunes are pored over by many people – these fortunes are a symptom of

1 Peter OSBORNE, *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals,* New York: Routledge, 2013, p vii.

2 *Ibid.*



contemporaneousness, the litmus paper of social moods. The philosopher gives an interview because she or her interviewer believes that her thoughts are relevant to the present and represent a key to its interpretation. At its core the interview is ambivalent. On the one hand, it has the potential to capture the openness of the present moment before it is subjected to the verdict of the future. On the other, the popularity of the genre across all levels of published output is also a symptom of our obsession with the present moment, our impatience, and our inability to perceive things from the perspective of a longer time horizon. The interview is a document of its times in this double sense.

The people interviewed in this book are not obscure intellectuals whose works would otherwise remain unintelligible. The selection of topics is down to a random combination of interests and the conviction that these people have something significant to say regarding our current situation. The term current situation is intended to apply to both the contemporary art world and the broader political and economic context. These interviews represent a conscious endeavour to rearticulate the relationship of intellectuals and artists to society, a relationship that is the outcome of shifts along the fault lines of that society.

The genre of the interview is determined by a tension between manipulation, conscious intention and the uncontrollable. The interviews took place against

the backdrop of the events of 2013. We had not anticipated these events and were unable to do them justice as they unfolded, and so this is the level of the text that was impossible to foresee, a level that with hindsight appears fundamental to the entire publication. For 2013 was not only the year of an ongoing social and economic crisis, especially in Europe, but also played unexpected witness to new waves of unrest and revolt that spread around the world with unclear outcomes. The Turkish Spring that took place on Taksim Square in Istanbul, the mass demonstrations in Latin America, the events in Bosnia that in autumn spilled over into Ukraine, where protests culminated in genuine revolution... It became clear that the unrest of 2010 and 2011 had not been an isolated phenomenon, but part of a longer-term tendency, the symptom of an interim stage, the consequences of which are impossible to predict. What do these mass protests, on the periphery of which we find ourselves being drawn in, whose actors are students, the unemployed and young people suffering conditions of precarity, and that begin with a feeling of euphoria and the promise of utopia, only to lapse back into the status quo, or even worse, actually mean? How are they reflected in society, how do they change it, e.g. in the sphere of art? These questions unwittingly frame the interviews contained in this book.

However, there are always two parties to an interview. The questioner is not an equal partner but remains in the shadow of the interviewee. On the other hand, the questioner is a mediator and crucial to the outcome of the interview. They function as a lens that provides information, inevitably highlighting certain opinions expressed, while downplaying or even concealing others. It is obvious that it is the questioner's own life experience that comprises this filter or perspective. In this respect it is relevant that we come from a supposedly calm Central European setting, from an art scene that plays no great role within the global art world, and a political arena that tends more to subordinate itself to circumstances rather than generating its own topics. It is also relevant that we belong to the generation born in the first half of the 1980s, that growing up we experienced the post-communist transformation head on, as well as the subsequent disillusion therewith, and that we began our professional careers just when the economic crisis was beginning. When we looked around we saw ever growing inequality in society and the deterioration of public institutions. Perhaps this is the reason that, in the Czech Republic at least, our generation has launched a new wave of criticism of the existing relations in art and society as a whole, a critique that has proved unacceptable and unintelligible to a large number of intellectuals from previous generations. This critique offers a perspective that no longer views the current crisis as a temporary lapse from which it will be possible to move to a genuinely functioning liberal democracy, but, on the contrary, a systemic crisis, the birth pains of a new era, an era that might represent a change for the better, but might also prove to be catastrophic.

We no longer live in a state of post-communist euphoria, triumphant in the knowledge of the victory of democracy over totalitarianism, a victory that, if it isn't already complete, soon will be. We perceive the past far less unambiguously and the future as extremely insecure. In the meantime, our present sees citizens being categorised as first or second class (with Roma people, immigrants and marginalised groups belonging to the second group), a fierce battle for resources, tumultuous climatic changes, sophisticated military conflicts, and elites that often remain imprisoned within their bubbles on social networks. And so we ask ourselves what our role is at present, how we should confront the challenges it creates, and how we might avert catastrophe and assist in the creation of a fairer world. And since we operate in the sphere of art, we are naturally interested in what role we might play in all of this as artists, critics and intellectuals. Are we diagnosticians? Psychotherapists? Prophets? Collateral damage? The incipient vanguard of some future revolutionary class? Or is it that our social status, our occupation (our work) plays no role whatsoever in all of this?

Self-binding against gravity
Hito Steyerl on artistic work and military metaphors

The thematic block of the conference Former West, at which you appeared with your performative lecture I Dreamed a Dream: Politics in the Age of Mass Art Production, focused on the social-political conditions of artistic production. This used to be a neglected topic, but now it seems that more and more people are talking about it. How do you explain this?

I think it's basically unavoidable. Years ago there was already a kind of political turning point in the art world. However, it was only rarely that artists, curators and other interested parties engaged with the political conditions of the art sphere as such outside the framework of traditional institutional criticism. There are more and more artists and they work under conditions that are closely related to general trends within society. They are often freelancers and find themselves in a similar situation as many other professions. It is interesting to examine the question of art production if only because the idea of the artist as being different and somehow removed from society no longer corresponds to reality. If we are speaking of art production we have in mind a far larger segment of society.

Was it not precisely this topic that you addressed in your performative lecture, during which you projected the performance by Susan Boyle in

the singing competition Britain's Got Talent in 2008? This was a not very attractive woman aged 47 who dumbfounded everyone with her vocal register. As a contemporary artist, what is your relationship to this "superstar" and her role in the competition?

I feel very close to her. By the way, we are roughly the same age. She is one of many women who become "invisible" as they grow older. They are taken for granted by society, nobody notices them, and absolutely nobody expects to find them in the glare of the spotlight with something important they feel the need to get off their chests. Boyle is a hero of mine. Her performance touched me, which is why I wanted to use it. There was nothing ironic about it, however it might appear ambivalent within the context of a television spectacle. Susan Boyle and others who try for success in similar talent shows simply reveal the rules of the neoliberal market and the position of freelancers on said market. Think of all the hanging around in a queue, rehearsals, casting calls … you try to sell what you think will be successful, whether this is a service or an ability. It might seem as though contemporary artists are not so spectacular, that they are more unobtrusive. In fact, it is basically the same for them too. It's like a kind of catwalk, except the models are naked and desperately looking for some way of drawing attention to themselves.

Having said that, even though freelancers complain about being under stress and not having enough money, they still very much appreciate their independence. This applies especially to artists. Is this a false feeling?

Not at all. My film Lovely Andrea (2007), about the Japanese binding method, was about this. For me, binding was an allegory for work conditions. The traditional working conditions represent traditional bondage. There is the master and slave, the oppressor and the oppressed. However, during my research I discovered a Japanese performer who regards things somewhat differently. She binds herself and hangs herself from the ceiling. The division of labour into master and slave no longer makes sense. She feels incredibly free, because she has overcome gravity. However, she achieves this through repressing herself – through self-binding. I take this as a metaphor of freelance work, since such a person is both their own master and oppressor. The feeling of bliss is the result of temporarily overcoming dependency, of being in a position over and above the world. There is a certain grace involved. It makes no sense to claim that this is morally wrong. Instead, we should examine this uplifting feeling and build a consciousness of mutual togetherness on the basis of it.

You often speak of the art world and art itself using military terms. You claim that a museum is a battlefield, an artist should be a guerrilla, art "occupies" our life, etc. What is concealed beneath this discursive strategy?

What I've noticed is that you'll find loads of artworks in galleries that deal in some way with military

conflicts, warzones, occupied regions, etc. Over the last decade this has been a real feature of exhibitions, biennales, and other large occasions devoted to contemporary art. However, is it possible to experience the consequences of this militarisation, which is taking place around the world and which artists enjoy documenting and dealing with artistically, even within the institution of art? How does it impact on working conditions? A gallery gives the impression of being a disinfected, neutral space, where absolutely everything can be shown to the public. But of course this is not the case. It is a space that is based on power relations similar to those we find in many other societal spheres – let's take the position of self-employed people as an example. However, I was also fascinated by the literal militarisation of art institutions – the leasing of and method of financing security services.

In other words, this is a strategy that is intended to show that the institution of the gallery is situated at the centre of political and economic conflicts and not, as some people still seem to think, somewhere beyond or outside them?

I'm not sure whether they are located directly at the centre. At the end of the day artistic institutions are not really that important. However, I believe they can serve as sensors that pick up social and political processes taking place on a global level. The very fact that powerful people are attracted by the art world must inevitably be reflected in the art itself and its institutional structure.

You speak of the gallery as an institution that reveals the absence of the collective subject, which in turn becomes the object of desire. This would hint at some kind of emancipatory potential. At the same time, however, you claim that the gallery and art institutions in general are ornaments and means of legitimising capitalism. Do these two concepts not cancel each other out?

I'm inconsistent on principle. But in this case the concepts are not self-contradictory. Yeah, art is an ornament of capitalism, for sure. On the other hand, I'm surprised by how many people visit contemporary art galleries, as though they were a kind of alternative university, and these are often people who have little to do with the arts. I see in this a desire for something that people may not fully understand but nevertheless wish to be involved in. It's weird. It's as though people expect something from art that they can't find anywhere else in society. There's also the desire for a communal discussion that manifests itself in the form of a visit to a gallery and a walk around the works on show, something that, however, is doomed to failure.

Does this sense of expectation hold out the promise of an alternative future that is never otherwise spoken about? Could the artist be seen as a kind of prophet?

Yes. However, I reckon that above all people are hungry for something other than what they are offered by commercial television. They're looking for

different forms of expression. And these, of course, may hint at some kind of alternative future.

What about you? Do you have a vision of the future?

I'm against making concrete forecasts. Just look at how science fiction has failed in this respect. However, I am concerned that those who are facing a pervasive and gradual proletarianisation and pauperisation will have a long wait before they find their own position. They will not become a new class: their status will be different, though precisely in what way it is not yet clear. Everything that can lead to a realisation of these new social organisations and positions is hugely important, though it is not guaranteed to be successful immediately.

You say that it will be a long time before anything changes. Is this opinion related to your comparison of the present-day situation to that of the 19th century?

It most certainly does. For instance, the Louvre was violently occupied about six times in the 19th century. The revolution eventually took place, but in a completely different place – Russia. This process can last an incredibly long time. Revolutionary unrest takes place at ten, twenty and thirty-year intervals. It is a long-term project, though this shouldn't deter us from working on it.

Hito Steyerl (b. 1966) is a theoretician, artist, writer and documentary filmmaker interested in the construction of the image and the circulation of art works. Her films and installations have featured in numerous important contemporary art shows and festivals. Most of her texts are published by the magazine e-flux. This year a book of her essays was published entitled The Wretched of the Screen.

We’re the designers of our own prison
Boris Groys on art and politics

Recently you have been examining the conditions under which art is produced. How do you explain the current preoccupation with this issue?
I think it is explained by a simple sociological and statistical fact. In the modern period, art was only discussed within an aesthetic paradigm. Art was something we looked at. In this respect it was art for consumers. However, if we look back further in time, we find that in Ancient Greece the term “art” did not refer to aesthetics, but poetics. Art was understood as *techne*. This earlier definition referred to a certain process of production with its own rules and tools. I believe we are returning to this epoch. In statistical terms alone, the number of people involved in some way in artistic activities is increasing. More and more people are participating in creative work. This isn’t about the so-called creative class, i.e. designers, advertising creatives, etc. It is about the phenomenon of mass artistic production on the level of everyday life. People are creating and updating their websites, their profiles on social networks, designing their own apartments, clothes... they are more and more immersed in the creative process for themselves. Their daily lives have assumed the form of the creative process, performance. At the same time, each production is also the production of their own subjectivity. This process has accelerated over the last decade, and this is of course linked with the internet.

In the past it was completely normal to work and to produce day-to-day items. And then you had the abnormal people, the madmen and the artists. These days everyone is an artist and everyone's mad. We live in a neurotic, psychotic society, in a surrealist dream that has become reality. Everything the media shows us operates a bit like a surrealist dream, a collage of images of violence, consumption and desire. That's what everything around us looks like, including contemporary design. None of us is normal. And this is related to mass artistic production.

How do you yourself view this process?

In itself I don't think that mass artistic production is either positive or negative. We always have to ask ourselves what conditions – geopolitical, social, economic, subjective – open up a space for discussion. I believe that mass artistic production, as distinct from traditional forms of reproduction that are now basically becoming marginalised, represents this condition.

But how should we feel about the fact that life is being completely dissolved into art, and not art into life, as the avant-garde originally conceived of emancipatory developments?

I'd like to come at this from a slightly different direction. I'm no great fan of sociological approaches, but they can sometimes be useful. Prior to the French Revolution everyone knew how they were to dress according to their social status. Everyone knew what to eat and nobody, for instance, was interested in

the fusion of Japanese and Italian cuisine. Now we find ourselves in a completely different situation, and that's where our problem lies. We are prisoners of our own autonomy. We're doing nothing other than designing our own prison. Art is the interior design of the prison of our own autonomy: its walls, windows, furniture, etc. It was Plato who pointed out that the body was the prison of the soul. However, unlike us he believed that it was possible to escape. If you no longer believe it's possible to escape from prison, you begin to beautify it. Art represents a majestic answer to the problem of secularisation. It is an answer that appeared at the start of the 19th century and which addresses the question of how to react to the finality of our lives, how to deal with the desire for immortality. I don't believe that anything has changed fundamentally since that time. It's just that this romantic phenomenon has become a mass phenomenon. I have in mind the romanticisation of oneself. These days everyone is a Byron or Shelley surrounded by their adoring public.

You often focus on the unconscious repetition of originally artistic acts in everyday life that appear to have been simply imposed on us. But could the conscious repetition of such acts not conceal emancipatory potential?

The question of art, but also of technology, goes much deeper than the whole of this problematic. When you are born you don't ask whether it is appropriate to breathe or not. You're not in a position to deal with such matters. If you want to

problematise the entire issue, you have to have an air purifier. This must necessarily come before such questioning. It's the same in the case of art. Art and technology create a world that we adapt to. Yeah, of course we can try to destroy art and technology. But this in itself is a way of adapting, albeit negatively. All of our reactions to a phenomenon assume that it already exists and that we have to come to terms with it. We can repeat something in the positive or negative sense of the word. However, we can only return to the moment when the thing appeared. Let me tell you an old Soviet joke. A guy goes into a shop. He can't understand why there's such a long queue. The others tell him: if you could just arrive yesterday, you'd be first in line. The problem is you can't arrive yesterday. This impossibility is what makes us dependent on art. Art is certainly dependent on us, but we are also dependent on art.

You refer to analogies between the present day and the 19th century, as though we were travelling in a spiral...

It's not so much a spiral, but more a series of waves, sinusoids. And we're not travelling but being dragged, by life and history. We found ourselves in a particular place and time and so we read what's written in historical documents and look for what was different and what was the same. If yet again we have a conception of nation states, religions, the return of ethnicity, mass culture, liberalism, the market, terrorism, etc., then we're really not so far away from certain images of the 19th century.

Ok, so in the 19th century there was no internet. It was the epoch of the mass consumption of art and not the mass production of art, as it is these days. The 19th century was also a time of socialist utopias that were realised in the 20th century. These days we also have utopias, the only difference being that they're reactionary and regressive.

Would it be true to say that one of the reasons you return to the 19th century is to emphasise that the epoch of serious attempts at the realisation of emancipatory ideas – if such even exist today – is very remote?

Yes. Though actually I don't believe it's so remote. I think that our national, liberal model is exhausted. I believe that we are moving in the direction of greater geopolitical tension, new wars, and world revolutions. In my opinion, the internet in its current form will not survive, partly because of the threat of cyber warfare.

You believe the internet is a medium that is definitively material. It is controlled by companies that prey upon us, the web users. Do you know Googleplex in Silicon Valley? It's a kind of village for Google employees, where their food is free and they enjoy special medical care that's also free. Is it not ironic that it is the endless ranks of the precariat that make possible this utopian existence of a privileged few?

I've heard about this. But more interesting for me is the fact that in the schools where the inhabitants

of Silicon Valley send their kids they're not allowed to use the internet and computers. I believe they're anticipating a post-internet era.

You are a trenchant critic of the European left and especially leftwing theory. You say that the current European left is against authority and that these days this approach is completely impotent and conformist. Could you explain this? Do you think that a critique of power and authoritarianism that links the concept with the repression of others is irrelevant?

I believe that politics is meaningful only if it wants to shoulder authority. If it doesn't, then it simply undermines itself. You can't be against authority in general. You have to be against that form of authority that you believe to be bad, and support the authority you believe to be right. It's the same with the internet: to be for or against it makes no sense. If you want to be political, you have to have authority. This is implicit in every political act, be it leftwing or rightwing. The theme of violence and the questions related to it are not our problem but the problem of our enemies. If I crave authority, the resources by which I want to achieve this objective are determined by those who don't want it. I'm not acting in a politically neutral space. It's absurd when politicians don't want people to resist but only to receive. If you want to be involved in politics then you're surrounded by enemies. That's just a fact – it's the definition of politics. More and more these days you hear the nonsensical idea being bandied about that there exists something collective, general, something we all share and that brings us all together. But we live in a post-Freudian, post-Nietzschean and post-Marxist age, so we know that the world is divided and fractured. There's nothing that could be communal. For instance, it's an illusion to think that something like an art world exists. It's more a space for the confrontation of various approaches. But taken en masse, these approaches do not add up to an art world, more an art war.
Confrontation and fragmentation are the facts of our lives. We have to accept this and not project ourselves into some kind of absurd utopia, in the negative sense of the word. If you want to change something, you have to accept it.

So would it be true to say that you believe that the problem we face at present is that authorities pretend that they aren't authorities?

Exactly, they're lying to us from all sides. Take the concept of so-called democratic institutions that, when defending their legitimacy, say: You elected us, we don't represent authority, we simply represent the expression of your will. It goes without saying that this is nonsense, and when this becomes clear then the conflict can begin. But then some pseudo-idealistic leftist comes along and starts saying: They're the authority, not us, we simply manifest your will. In other words, everyone's making out they're expressing my will. Except I don't have any will, I'm simply here. I'd rather stay in bed and read a good book. I don't have any will, or should I say political

will. However, they coming crowding round and tell me I have to do this or that, I have to pay taxes, I have to treat the environment in such and such a way... But these are other people who come and express their own will. Then claim it's my will, I don't believe them, because it isn't my desire, it's something they want of me. And so it's up to me what I decide and how I behave. If I want to be active and enter the arena, formulate a programme and recruit thousands to my cause, then it'll be me who searches out others...

... who also lack political will ...

Yes. I'll say to them: This is your will, this is what you actually want. If you don't want ecological catastrophe, you have to want this and that, etc. Every desire needs political will. However, this will is imposed on us. You can't say whether it's good or bad, it's simply a fact. Everything is imposed on us: our religion, name, gender, nationality, parents... everything. I see it and I'm confused, but I have to live with it – with this table, this art, this media, my own name. I don't like it and I don't want it, but I have to live with it, and above all I have to find some kind of approach, an approach that isn't only mine but is socially meaningful, because I live in society. It is complete hypocrisy to say that other people express my will or that I express theirs. It simply isn't true and it doesn't matter whether it is being said by the left or the right.

Do artists act in the same way?

Yes, they try to. For instance, Malevich came along and declared that we all had to want his black square, something that actually determines all pictures. So I say to myself, why not? But that's my decision. I can decide otherwise and say I don't accept or recognise it. But this is being imposed on us. Not the black square, but the necessity of deciding, of adopting a stance to it. You can't escape it. Even refusing to look at this black square at all presupposes some kind of attitude. You can't escape this dilemma. At the moment that someone turns to you and asks something of you, you have to react. But it doesn't come from you. Our actions are always reactions. I'm no great fan of Heidegger, but I think in this case he was right. Our decisions are provoked by our surroundings. It's an ontological provocation that we cannot escape.

Let's talk about the performance by Marina Abramović at MoMA, New York, during which the artist sat immobile for hundreds of hours while visitors to the exhibition took it in turns to sit opposite her. According to you her body reflected living corpses, our alienated bodies exploited by the internet. Could a contemporary artist also be the paradigm of a body other than the contemporary, i.e. alienated, body?

Of course they could. However, the question is what you're looking for. If you're looking for "something different", then you may find that everyone else is too. When you ask people what they want, everyone replies that above all it has to be something

different. Art has a habit of overlooking what is. The ongoing desire to do something different blinds us to the reality of life and that which already exists. Only a few artists are capable of restricting themselves simply to revealing the reality of our existence to us, as Marina Abramović does in this performance. I'm not against doing something different in principle: on the contrary. However, above all I'm interested in what is already here.

Boris Groys (b.1947) is a critic, philosopher, media theoretician and curator of Russian origin. At present he is professor of Russian and Slavic studies at New York University and a research worker at the Karlsruhe University of Art and Design. After emigrating to Germany in 1981 he became one of the most important interpreters of Russian modernist and contemporary art abroad. He won world renown with his study of the covert links between the avant-garde and socialist realism as embodied in the Stalinist regime entitled Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin (1988, The Total Art of Stalinism, 1992). Since then he has published many other books. He publishes essays devoted to contemporary art and life on the e-flux website. The latest exhibition he curated was last year's After History: Alexandre Kojève as a Photographer, at BAK, Utrecht.

When the world is depressed
Franco “Bifo” Berardi on a catastrophe that can no longer be averted

In your texts you repeatedly return to certain events that radically shift the coordinates of the social and political situation. Has something of this kind taken place recently? How do you view matters at present?

I would cite 2011 as a turning point. It was the last beautiful year of my life before everything took a turn for the worse. I’m still trying to understand it. It’s a different situation to that in 1968, 1977 or 1989. We all know what happened in those years, but so far very few people have attempted to grasp the significance of 2011. December 2010 saw protests take place in London, a city that is not used to mass events. I was there at the time and had the feeling that something new was being born in both the cultural and social sphere. After that came the Arab revolutions, in December it was the turn of Tunis, in January and February Cairo, etc. These Arab revolutions were something completely new. The movement that was born on Tahrir Square in Cairo was cosmopolitan, libertarian, and had nothing to do with traditional fundamentalism. Then there were the Spanish protest camps and Occupy Wall Street... I started to think that this was the beginning of the process of a new social composition, as we say in Italy, specifically the new composition of the precarious bodies of cognitive workers.

At the beginning of 2012, I was in Beirut for two months teaching artists, architects and curators. Most of my students were from Egypt, the Palestinian territories and Jordan. They too had the feeling that the Egyptian revolution marked the start of a cultural transformation of the region, and they were enthusiastic. However, at the end of my trip I met two Syrians, a young man and woman. The girl told me that, though she was not Muslim and came from a Christian family, she was willing to accept Islamic dictatorship if only Assad could be overthrown, because he was a murderer and genuine enemy. That was when I realised that things were heading in the wrong direction, and this has proved to be the case.

What is your opinion of the development of social movements in Europe and America?

In December 2011, I gave a lecture at MoMA PS1. The place was packed to the rafters. We were discussing how you set about creating a movement against student debts, and Occupy Wall Street was at its peak. I returned to New York in November of the following year. Occupy Wall Street had changed its name to Occupy Sandy, something I found very significant. I saw it as a metaphor for what had happened in 2012. The human race – and New York is in its way the centre of the human race – had finally cottoned on to the fact that the world can no longer be changed, because certain tendencies are too deeply rooted in our environment.

In Europe, 2012 was a year of depression and the disintegration of movements. London these days is the capital of cynicism: a sense of total defeat hangs in the air. Ok, I admit I'm talking from the point of view of a very small group of Londoners: artists, intellectuals and activists. But these are the very people who create space-time, who react most sensitively to changes. These days I'm not absolutely certain what being an artist means. To a certain extent an artist is anyone who has feelings for things. When I travel to a foreign city, gallery or museum these are the people I'm attracted to. Artists interest me most of all. I have the feeling that they understand, see and feel.

Spain is one of the last places where this movement has not been completely defeated. However, the Catalan separatist movement is increasingly popular, and this in my opinion is the beginning of a very dangerous proliferation of the politics of identity. Catalonia has always been a peace-loving place populated by leftists and libertarians. You can't say the same for Madrid or the Basque Country. Next year Catalonians want to hold a referendum, but Madrid is against it. There is the risk of a similar conflict in Italy. Perhaps this is the future of Europe: conflict between regions, a war in which the poor fight the poor. This isn't temporary or interim. I am not expecting the resurgence of emancipatory movements.

So what do you believe will happen?

I can imagine what will happen over the next ten years. And I don't find it particularly interesting, because it's hard to see anything other than

catastrophe. That's why I'm trying to look into the more remote future. I don't expect to live longer than five years and I don't want to. Rather than confront the present, over the next few years I would like to think about what might happen in the second half of this century. It's very likely that the human race will not survive in the form we know it today. I'm interested in the theory of transhumanism, from Donna Haraway via Nikolai Fyodorov, the Russian visionary, to Raymond Kurzweil and contemporary transhumanism. I was interested by what President Obama said: that the next ten years would be the decade of research into the activities of the human brain as they relate to the general intellect, i.e. collective intellectual abilities, and the relationship between the general intellect and the body. The decisive blow will be either the final capture of the brain by the matrix of semio-capitalism, or the possibility of a new composition of the social body and the general intellect.

Your book The Uprising, written in 2011, is about poetry and finance. We're fascinated by your sceptical take on politics and the fact that, in contrast, you promise much from poetry, which you believe has the power to disrupt the status quo. Could you say how?

In this book I examine the relationship between the language of poetry and financial capitalism. The original idea was related to the genesis of finance. I begin with the methodology of symbolism, which is based on the idea that language is something autonomous.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries poets began to feel and claim that language is an autonomous sphere that has its own rules. Formalistic theories also make an appearance. Poets liberated language from its referential function. In the book I tried to link the process of the liberation of language to what was happening in the sphere of economics. This has nothing to do with the political responsibility of poets or the direct influence of poetry. In the real world financiers and poets don't encounter each other. However, they belong to the same zeitgeist.
In 1971 Richard Nixon liberated the dollar from the gold standard, from its referential function. The entire process began back then but is only becoming evident now. We see that money forms a sphere that is completely independent of reality, to such an extent that the newspapers are telling us that Greece is out of the crisis and that everything is in order. Well, the situation on the stock exchange may be ok, but there are a huge number of people out of work. The financial cartography of the world is completely detached from reality. In the 1920s and 30s, the time of Roosevelt and Keynes, finance was still arguably the cartographer of the world. These days things are different: finance is satisfied when the world is in depression. The closer to death we are, the better for the financial system. You have to see it from an economic perspective too. Take, for instance, what are known as new financial instruments, i.e. credit default swaps, derivatives, etc. If you invest in something and this investment makes a profit, you receive money. If it doesn't make

a profit, you receive even more money thanks to swaps – your investment is insured. It obliges you to destroy things. People invest money in buildings and plant and then destroy them, because destruction offers a higher profit than production.

So what is the role or task of poetry under these circumstances?

That's what the second part of the book is about. I try to say that poetry and social movements are moving ever closer, that they represent the process of the reactivation of the erotic body of society, the recreation and re-composition of solidarity. Poets are doctors and therapists, whereas if we look at the art of previous decades we see that in the 1990s and the Noughties they were more like prophets. The artists Miranda July and Eija-Liisa Ahtila, the writer Jonathan Franzen and his novel The Corrections, and the filmmaker Kim Ki-duk examine the pathology of the social psyche. In my book I argue that we should take the next step and move from the diagnostic phase to the therapeutic. However, I'm not at all sure whether we're capable of this. I can't see the doctor I'm waiting for anywhere. My own GP tells me: "You know what? You're seriously ill." Well what am I supposed to say to that? Thanks for the info, Doc. I'm waiting for a doctor who'll know how to cure me.

Could you be more precise about what form our illness takes?

We can characterise the form of this pathology by saying it is like a spasm. A spasm is an accelerated vibration of the body that is painful because our muscles, skin and brain can't tolerate such speed, they aren't adapted to it. The relationship between the body and its environment, by which I mean work, information, as well as the material environment, is convulsive in the sense that we are obliged to react too fast. It is a problem of intellectual rhythm, the rhythm of understanding, deciphering, perceiving. What is perception? The ability to understand something that cannot be expressed in words. You can genuinely understand or feel something if the rhythm of your perception is in harmony with the rhythm of the environment in which you find yourself. Could you imagine the rhythm of the environment slowing down? I couldn't. I can't image a slowing down of the info-sphere, life itself. The therapeutic act cannot consist in our going back, it cannot be about a return to some idea of the good old days. The path out of this resides in some new rhythm of collective thinking and the collective body. To be honest, I don't know what it should be. But I can see that the human brain is "out of joint" and that this is where we should start from. It is only possible to find the path to a new harmony on the level of perception, which is why I turn to poets. How could it be realised? I have no idea.

How does this relate to current social problems, unemployment and the like?

The role that the general intellect plays, not only in intellectual life but in the production and distribution of things, is crucial. Our problems consist in

the fact that, as part of the general intellect, we are completely clogged up by the potential of financial capital. We are obliged to follow its rhythm and accept the rules of the financial apparatus. If you are able to provide the general intellect a different rhythm, another method for its own organisation, you do not liberate only the general intellect from financial subservience, but you also create the possibility of a different social organisation, production, etc. It goes without saying that this can mean a host of things. Someone might create a biosphere in Arizona. Someone else might found a commune. It's about a life experiment. Basically, there is no future programme between life and art. It's already happening.

I take Obama's project charting the activities of the brain very seriously. The previous charting of the human genome was a therapeutic act, in the sense that it was not only a description but also a prescription, an attempt to change something in the genetic sphere. This is why, for instance, it is possible to a certain extent to prevent cancer. Charting the brain means creating the possibilities and conditions for a change in its activities. Of course, it is important what the justification will be and who carries it out. Will it be poets or financiers? This is where the basic struggle will take place in the near future. It's no longer possible to avert the financial destruction of the world. It's already underway. If a revolution takes place somewhere, then why not? But Sandy can't be stopped, as Occupy Wall Street intimates with its change of

name. It's a thought-provoking metaphor. The only thing that remains for us to occupy is catastrophe. The question is no longer whether a different world is possible, but whether a different form of thinking is possible.

Why were these movements unable to avert the financial destruction of the world?

The movements in Europe – I'm thinking here of trade unions, workers, students – were shown to be incapable of doing anything to prevent the destruction of Greece. Not one European-wide demonstration was held, not one single general strike. When the protests of 2011 were taking place, I thought that they would flip over into something more general. But I was wrong, I had deceived myself. I had hoped for something, but at the same time I knew it was really difficult and maybe even impossible. It's not a problem of political incompetence, but the impossibility of a new social composition. People like me who lived through the 1970s talk in terms of the working class. But this hasn't applied for a long time. And it's impossible to create anew the precariat. Precarity does not relate only to the relationship between labour and capital, but also to the mutual and intimate relationship between working bodies. This means that you will not meet the other again. Every worker is a molecule that is in one place today, another tomorrow.

But precarity did not always have only negative connotations in leftwing thinking …

That's true. One of the slogans of 1977 was: "*precario è bello*", the precariat is beautiful. For us it meant freedom, the possibility of changing jobs when we weren't happy, or at least giving up work for a while. But the conditions on the job market were completely different back then. These days real wages are about half of what they were then. Work also presupposes solidarity, and this is not a matter of choice or ideology. Certain conditions make solidarity possible, namely when the bodies of workers encounter each other on a day to day basis. They are friends, they don't compete. As opposed to this, precarity means that everyone is a competitor. Ok, you can cooperate, but you're interacting with a screen and not a person, and you're aware that it might replace you in your work. The social and geographic conditions of work make it impossible for precarity to be transformed into solidarity, or at least very difficult. The main problem for the movements of the last twenty years was the ability to hang on in there, to exist for longer than two or three months. Young people like meeting up for a moment, an hour or so. But after that they feel uncomfortable. It's difficult for them to be together for a longer period of time. People are losing the ability to look forward to the physical presence of the other in time. The weakness of movements is not located in politics, but in psychology and physicality. It's a social problem. The other is not your friend, he's your competitor. Psychologically you can deny it, but in your heart of hearts you know it's true and you can't change it. The left in Italy, France and probably in the Czech Republic too say that we have

to fight against precarity. But this is false and doesn't mean anything. Precarity is not a matter of political decision-making.

Precarity is often seen as a symptom of a disappearing middle class, as the obverse of the new economic and creative industries. In your opinion, what is the difference between the poets in whom the promise of emancipation resides, and workers in the creative industry?

This is why I don't refer to artists but poets. The world of art is so close to the creative industry that it's virtually one and the same. The creative industry means the subordination of creativity to economic rules. The enthusiastic rhetoric of the creative industries and the new economy predominated in the 1990s. During the last ten years, the creative industries have been dominated in the main by precarious working conditions. From 1995 to 1999, at least in the US and certain parts of Europe, it was genuinely possible to do business creatively, to create different start-ups based on ideas. But then the dotcom bubble burst and the social and economic conditions of creative business changed. Successful programmers, advertising creatives and designers suddenly became precarious workers. The crisis in 2008 followed on from that in spring 2000. Basically the same process was involved, i.e. the collapse of a creative utopia. In the 1990s this related to the internet and art, and finally it was creativity in the financial sector. In this sense art is closely linked to business.

Poets are not so bound up with the economic sphere and the creative industries. The poetic mission is to refuse to subjugate creativity to the economy, and this presupposes a new definition of the term creativity. Does creativity refer only to different forms of an ever identical economic content? Or does it mean the ability to imagine a world beyond the boundaries of the economic?

If poets can be prophets or even doctors, what role do you believe philosophers should play at present?

I see philosophy as being the perception of tendencies. Take Marx, for instance. Was he a prophet? In a certain sense, yes. Somewhere he wrote that he was "not in the business of writing recipes for the cook-shops of the future". It is not a question of utopia, the description of a utopian or dystopian future, but the reading of tendencies. This means you have to imbibe and intuit the direction that the collective mind, knowledge and abilities are taking. But then there also exist opposing tendencies. In the Grundrisse, a Fragment on Machines, Marx writes about the general intellect as the condition for the liberation of humankind from capitalist repression. However, this doesn't mean that this emancipation is necessary. It doesn't ineluctably have to happen, because there are also contradictory trends in operation that might come to fruition. I don't like the kind of optimism that declares that something is inscribed in the present that will take place in the future. In this respect I don't agree with Antonio Negri. Prophecy is a highly complicated art. It isn't only about reading possibilities but also monitoring ailments, pathologies and contradictory tendencies.

Do prophets have disciples?

Good prophets don't have many disciples. Most prophets are solitary figures. Take Cassandra or *Tiresias*, for example.

Franco "Bifo" Berardi (b.1948) is an Italian Marxist theoretician and activist who focuses on the role of the media and information technology in post-industrial capitalism. At the end of the 1970s he set up the artistic and activist radio station Radio Alice, which became an important presence within the Italian Autonomia social movement. He has written more than twenty books and innumerable essays. He examines the current central role of human emotions and the ability to communicate in the methods of production and consumption that support the dynamic of capitalism in post-industrial society. He is also interested in the social role of art, poetry and futurology, from Italian futurism to cyberpunk.

Emancipation through care
Silvia Federici on reproductive work

You have been interested in the problematic of work all of your life. Is there a reason for this?
I grew up in Italy in the aftermath of World War II, at a time when expectations of social change were high, though soon they were to be disappointed. By the mid 1960s the discontent surfaced in a growing factory-workers' movement. As a young woman, living in a communist town, I was naturally attracted to these struggles which, at that time, seemed the main path to revolutionary change. I was also influenced by the anti-colonial struggle. I was in high school at the time of the Cuban revolution. In our school we stayed out of classes to celebrate. The anti-colonial struggle laid bare the importance of slave labor in the history of capitalist society. All this is why I was attracted by those strands of feminism that looked at sexual discrimination from the viewpoint of the work that women do and the position they occupy in the capitalist organization of work. The women's movement, as well as my personal experience growing up in a very patriarchal society, helped me focus on the question of reproduction, i.e. on the activities associated with domestic work, care work, the upbringing and sustenance of human beings, etc. It helped me recognize that there is another kind of work beside factory work, which is what the left concentrated upon. The left could only see workers in blue overalls and in the factories. I, too, grew up with this perspective, though my mother was always asking me:

“But what about housework? What about farmers?” Later, the women’s movement provided me with the theoretical and political framework to answer these questions. I realized that the traditional socialist concept of work excluded all activities that reproduced my life and the lives of the people around me.

In the 1970s you participated in the Wages for Housework Campaign, which demanded remuneration from the state for unpaid work in the home. What did the campaign achieve and what are the consequences of your efforts?

The campaign never became a movement. But we did have groups in several countries and an international network. And we succeeded in raising consciousness about the fact that reproduction is work, and it is work that benefits all employers because it produces on a daily and generational basis the workforce, it produces labor power, which is the main source of wealth for the capitalist class. Without workers, no kind of economic activity could take place, and this is what women’s labor in capitalism has produced. Today this is generally accepted, at least in most social justice movements, but in the early 1970s we encountered a lot of opposition, especially from the left.

Unfortunately, our campaign was also unpopular in the feminist movement, because liberal currents prevailed within it. The dominant strategy was the fight for equality, for equal opportunities on the job market, and we were accused of institutionalizing women in the home. For us it was just the opposite.

We believed that women are already institutionalized as housewives, because domestic work has been completely naturalized as women’s labor, precisely because it is not waged work in a society that is governed by monetary relations. Moreover, we did not demand wages for *housewives*, but wages for *housework*. We believed that fighting for a wage for this work would be the most effective way to denaturalize it. In addition, we didn’t see our demand as a revolution, but as a tool to change the power relations between women and capital and women and men, and to make us economically independent from men. We rejected the assumption that independence from men is only possible through paid employment. We rejected the idea of struggling for the right to work, since this implied we were not working already. Most importantly, we believed that no qualitative change can occur in society unless we challenge the devaluation of what is the most important activity on earth: the reproduction of human life. Of course, that devaluation is not overcome simply by putting a price tag on housework, but we believed it begins there. It begins by challenging an unequal sexual division of labor that is founded on the unpaid reproductive work women are expected to do. This is why the WFH campaign remains important, although today the social context has changed and I realize we also need to create new and more cooperative forms of reproduction.

You speak of a current crisis of reproduction. Could you expand on what you mean by that?

The crisis of reproduction consists in the fact that women who, traditionally, have been the main subjects of reproductive labor, have more and more entered the waged workforce and at the same time no new provision has been made to replace their work. There has been a commercialization of some reproductive tasks, which had led to an immense expansion of the service sector. In the US and many countries of the European Community, we have also seen what Arlie Russell Hochschild has called the 'globalization of care', in the sense that many reproductive activities, like childcare and eldercare, are now performed by immigrant women, who have come from different parts of the global south to work as nannies, cleaners, nurses or employees in fast food outlets under extremely precarious conditions not subject to standard rules. Reproductive activities have also been outsourced. Think, for instance, of the new phenomenon of surrogate motherhood, or the creation of centers in India, Thailand, and some countries of Eastern Europe where elder parents are being sent to avoid the cost of a nursing home or a private careworker.

Waged work has not changed with the massive entrance of women into it. Hours are even longer than in the past. In most jobs there is no day care. In the US we do not even have government mandated maternity leave, and many women are afraid of telling their bosses that they have to care for children or elder parents because they are afraid of losing their jobs, of not being promoted, of giving the impression they are not committed to their job.

All this is creating a reproduction crisis. The elderly are living in a state of poverty and isolation that is unprecedented. Old age is becoming a nightmare. In the past, it was the women in a family who looked after the old folk and there was some support from the state, in the form of senior centers, or nurse aides who would go to bring elderly people, living at home and not completely self-sufficient, some help, like hot food. That meant that they could lead a dignified life. Today, old people are left to their fate and the number of suicides among them is increasing. Children too are suffering from a lack of attention and child mortality is also increasing. Many children spend the day alone, at least in the United States. In the US, official statistics indicate that one in four children has a mental disorder, such as attention deficit, depression, hyperactivity. I do not believe that this is the case. I believe that this is a convenient medicalization of a social problem, it is a response to a silent children's revolt against a society that less and less makes provision for them. And women are also in crisis, I mean working class, proletarian women. They work two or three shifts and after work they return home to face further duties – theirs is a never-ending working day. They have no time for themselves. More and more of them are suffering depression and regularly turn to psychopharma. Women are the largest group of people taking antidepressants. They take millions of pills that allow them to survive and continue to work. On top of it, immigrant women have to leave their homes and their children behind to the care of other women who, in turn,

have to give their own children to other women. Hochschild has spoken of global care chains, in this context: each woman has to rely on another woman more poor than she is who takes her children so she can care for the children of another woman, often across an ocean. We are also seeing the problems generated by the marketization of housework tasks. For instance, the macdonaldization of food preparation has produced a health crisis and an increase in obesity, now affecting even many children...
The crisis in essence is that the capitalist system continues to devalue reproductive work. In fact, globalization has even increased the degradation of reproduction. If we consider the disinvestment by the US in reproduction of the workforce (the cuts in health care, education, public transport etc.), the cuts in wages, the precarization of waged work, the privatization of land and urban spaces, we see that there has been a global attack on reproduction.

What is feminism's take on this? Where do you see its greatest failing?

In the so-called developed world feminism has lost its revolutionary character. It is no longer a social force capable of transforming society in a way that eliminates inequalities and the commodification of life. In many ways feminism has been institutionalized, it has been reduced to a campaign for equal opportunities. In the United States, for instance, reproduction has been abandoned as a terrain of struggle. As a result we don't even have mandated maternity leave, because many feminists believed

that maternity leave is a privilege and if we want to obtain equality with men, we have to show that we are the same as them. In the 1970s, some women in West Virginia who wanted to work in the mines were willing to be sterilized when the owners forbade them to take the job because it could impact negatively on their reproductive capacity. This can serve as a metaphor for the position that many feminists have taken with respect to the goals of the movement. In 1976, when the Supreme Court was reviewing decisions on maternity benefits, there was no mass feminist support for it. Something similar has happened in the case of women receiving welfare benefits in the form of assistance to families with dependent children. This, in our view (the view of the wages for housework campaign), was the first wage for housework, since it assumed that raising children is as an activity that must be compensated. But by the mid-seventies almost all the political forces began to attack this support and depict such work as parasitical on society, a waste of state money. Again, there was no strong opposition coming from the feminist movement against this.

If reproduction is to play a key role within feminism or any political movement, what concrete form should it take?

Reproductive work reproduces our lives, but in capitalism it has been subordinated to the reproduction of a workforce. Therefore, this work contains a fundamental contradiction. You are looking after people, i.e. you try to satisfy their needs, but you have

to do it under conditions that are not under your control and that are subordinate to the labor market. So you have to meet certain social expectations and duties that society lays upon you. Take, for instance, the relationship that parents have with their children. They want their children to be happy, but they have to discipline them to prepare them to become good, disciplined, workers. You raise children so that they can survive in this society and this means lowering their expectations about the pursuit of happiness. Of course, when you have to discipline your children you also have to discipline yourself. The emancipation of other people, especially our children, therefore also resides in our own liberation. We need to change the purpose of reproduction and work on our capacity for resistance and self-determination. This is a collective process that was begun by the women's movement. This is not simply about the emancipation of women. We need a different way of thinking about our relationships with children and parents and the institutions that look after children. For instance, we cannot look at childcare centers as parking lots for our children, so that we can work outside the home. Raising children is deciding what kind of world, what kind of society, we want to bring into existence. Potentially it can be a very creative work, as long as it is not reduced to the reproduction of a labor force destined to encounter various forms of exploitation.

Every political movement comes up against the question of its own survival, its own reproduction. Do current political movements know how to reproduce themselves?

Ever since the seventies various movements have created social centres that do not only organise political demonstrations and mobilise people, but operate as places for social interaction and alternative forms of care. These initiatives are important. We need spaces where we meet, where we share our experiences. But what is most important is that we recognize the needs that people have and do not engage in forms of political activism that (for instance) are only fit for young people or people who have no responsibilities towards others. For instance, when you begin and end a meeting can decide how many will attend it. If you have to hire a baby sitter to go to a political meeting you need to be sure that it does not begin two hours after the time set. Around ten years ago a discussion began in New York on the question of the self-reproduction of political movements, in response to the apparent decline of anti-globalisation protests. After Seattle, large anti-globalisation demonstrations were held in Europe, in Canada, in Mexico in which thousands of people participated. But after a while these melted away. Activists began asking themselves how to create a sustainable movement, and we understood that it is necessary to create forms of organization in which political activism and the reproduction of our everyday life are not separated. This is something the feminist movement had understood. Women's organisations were the first to grasp the need to create forms of political organisation that are

rooted in the transformation of our everyday life, the transformation of our relationships with the family, with men, etc. In our discussion on self-reproducing movements we realized that many older people and young people too felt excluded from political movements because of the way they were organized. Not everyone can sit in a meeting and discuss things until two in the morning or risk being teargassed in a demonstrations. A mass movement must find organizational forms that accommodate people who have to look after children or do other forms of care work, people who have health problems etc.. Political movements cannot sustain and reproduce themselves if they ignore the basic needs of everyday life. Otherwise many people are prevented from participating in their initiatives.

How do you see the role of the state in relation to reproductive work? How should we deal with the paradox that, if we engage in forms of collective reproduction, as you propose, then we are in fact taking the place of the state, which at least in its neoliberal form simply welcomes this fact?

Naturally, if "reproductive commons" remain happy islands in the midst of a society that is not changing we end up by replacing the state and only doing voluntary labor, as in Cameron's Big Society Program. But this is not what we speak about when we say that we need to create more cooperative forms of reproduction. Our goal is to regain control over our reproduction and end our dependence on the state, but we cannot reach this goal unless we reclaim the social wealth that the state has taken away from us, unless we see our commons as communities of resistance, as forms of organizations that are not self-enclosed but are the basis for a broad social struggle and social transformation. The goal is not replacing the state, it is cooperating in a process that gives us more control over our lives and more power with respect to the state, for instance, reappropriating the resources that the state now controls. It is important to keep in mind that the "public" is actually a form of private property, it is something that we do not possess and control, and is aimed at increasing the social productivity of labor, not our well-being. In fact, even before the welfare system was dismantled, many workers were excluded from it. In the United States, houseworkers were never entitled to social security. As far as the state was concerned houseworkers were not even considered as workers. We have seen that the state can shut down hospitals, cut subsidies to schools and public transport. So, our struggle should not be to go back to the days when the state made more investment in the "public", but to see what kind of healthcare, what kind of education, etc., we really need, and to create struggles capable of reappropriating the immense resources that the state has and then place them at the disposal of the reproduction of our lives.

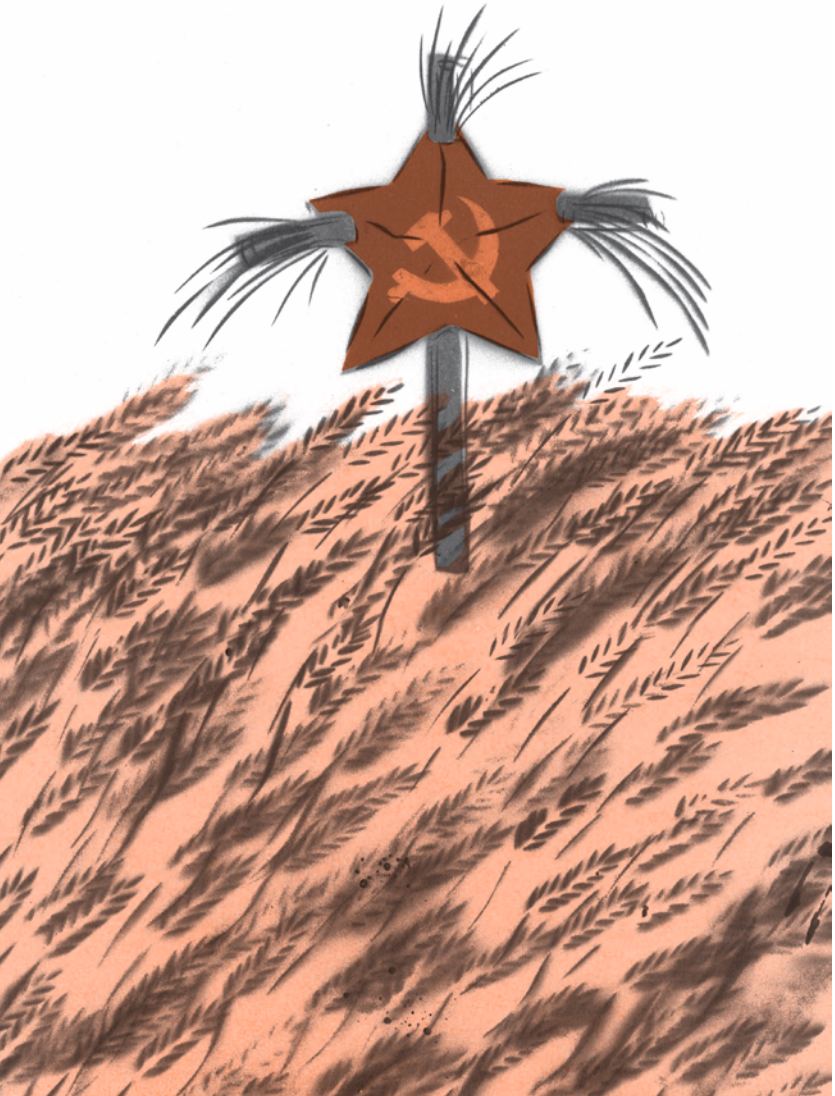
Once we started discussing how to organize our reproduction in a more cooperative way, we realized that, in the US at least, until the 1930s, most of the services that later were provided by the welfare state were provided by workers' organizations. The

fraternal workers organizations, as they were called, provided workers with pensions, compensation after work accidents, money for funerals etc. Until the 1930s, trade unions too did not organize only in the so-called work-place. They organized in the community as well, they addressed the needs of the workers and their families outside the factories, and, because of this, they had deep roots in the community. This was the source of their power, and when they went on strike the whole community supported them, because they were not separate from it. We often regard the welfare state as a great conquest, and in a certain sense this is true – it was the result of the struggle of several generations. But with the advent of state-provided public healthcare, education and social security, the trade unions gradually become isolated and detached from the life of the communities. They became organizations concerned only with the conditions of waged work and became increasingly bureaucratized.

Is there a political movement in the United States that is examining these questions and that could, in your opinion, have a future?

The last political movement that wanted to change society was Occupy Wall Street. It was a movement that spread around the whole United States and, despite its limitations, drew attention to the immensely unjust distribution of wealth in the country. For a short time, occupations and encampments became the seeds of a new society. Or at least, that is how many people perceived it. It was a community in which it was possible to plan life collectively, organize food distribution, cleaning teams, a library. Many young people were deeply affected by this experience. Of course, there were problems too. When the demonstrators started to camp in public spaces, they often found there were already other people there, i.e. the homeless, who at the time may have had drug problems, and joined the camps because they offered resources and a certain social life. Many occupiers were not ready for it. The camps have now disappeared but some people are still involved in the movement. When Hurricane Sandy tore through New York, they helped out in places far from the city centre that the state had left to their fate. Hundreds of young people travelled there for months and cleaned up, brought food and medicines to people who were stranded in their homes, going from home to home, helping to clean up.. Among other things, this sparked off an important discussion on how important it is that these activities do not simply replace the role of the state. It is important not to only provide help, but to create new social relations.

Silvia Federici (b. 1942) is an important feminist theoretician and activist. She is professor emerita at Hofstra University. During the 1970s she was involved in the Wages for Housework campaign. She worked for a long time in Nigeria and was active in the anti-globalisation movement. She wrote the book Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation (2004), a fundamental feminist critique of Marxism and its concept of women and work. An anthology of her texts on reproduction was recently published entitled Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle (2012).



So where's your society?
Boris Buden on elites, art and post-communism

Ten years ago you wrote about the paradoxical situation of East European intellectuals, who were adopting a critique of capitalism from the West and forgetting their own tradition. At that time you felt the East European left to be exhausted and lost. Is this still the case?

The 1990s was a period of great confusion and contradiction. The East European left had been defeated by a victorious Western ideology based on a critique of totalitarianism. It could not divest itself of the burden of the totalitarian legacy of the communist regimes. It reacted defensively. However, was it even left-wing? We are speaking here of people who were generally followers of the principles and ideals of liberal democracy and who were originally opposed to the ruling communist system. I myself was among them and I am very critical today of my naiveté. Or take, for instance, the case of the Hungarian philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás. He drew on the influence he enjoyed as a leading dissident from the period of communist rule in Hungary and invested all of his energy in implementing the principles of liberal democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, an open public space, free and independent media, etc. But later he realised that the system wasn't working as expected. It would be interesting to find out when exactly this disappointment occurred and what concretely initiated it, where the turning point is from a belief in liberal

democracy and a “good capitalism” into the need to challenge it.

But the so-called transition to democracy was deeply ambiguous from the very start. On the one hand, the euphoric atmosphere of freedom was in the air, while on the other, we had lived through the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil war in Yugoslavia. The situation in these countries had become significantly more complex and the post-communist present in many aspects suddenly turned out to be worse than the communist past. The left at that time, which comprised many members of the old communist parties, was itself in the process of radical transformation. They “did what they had to”, i.e. exactly what the conservatives and the proponents of neoliberal reforms wanted them to do. As a consequence, whatever their promises had been, they ended up holding a fire sale of state or social properties, i.e. the final privatisation of the welfare state. Regardless of whether this involved conservatives, former communists or liberals, what ensued was a transformation, the aim of which was ideologically liberal democracy, but in reality the unconditional integration of their societies into the system of global capitalism. Nobody at that time had any idea of what global capitalism actually meant. Everyone spoke of the inclusion of the countries of the former Eastern bloc into the West meaning a sort of normality and at the same time a historical necessity. But capitalism has changed too, and it has also done so in the name of a certain utopia, the utopia of a self-regulated, totally liberalised global market, which in fact implied above all the unlimited freedom of financial capital. Then came a shock in the form of the economic crisis. Moreover, it was soon clear that what is at stake is a deep crisis of the whole system of neoliberal capitalism, the crises of capitalism as a system. All those who until then had unconditionally supported liberal democracy and neoliberal reforms were suddenly brought face-to-face with reality. Now we all know that an activist or a politician in any of the post-communist societies is completely incapable of influencing the fate of the people in their countries in any significant way. They cannot fulfil their promises under conditions that are completely outside of any democratic control. Moreover, it is becoming clear that the lack of democratic control is itself a precondition for the functioning of global capitalism. The honeymoon of capitalism and democracy, which lasted for almost two decades after the collapse of communism, is over. Now we must think again of the necessity for democracy to divorce capitalism if it really wants to survive.

Did no new opposition come into being?

There is a new left-wing, the post-communist generation, which experienced transformation first-hand. The life of young people in Prague, Sarajevo or Tbilisi, in Warsaw or Moscow, obviously differs in many respects. However, there is something they all share, namely the experience of a confrontation with a form of power that they can barely influence, let alone change, on the level of their own society or

country. People are encountering something similar in both the West and the East. It is the experience of the end of post-communism, and the loss of faith in the utopian vision of liberal democracy and the self-regulating logic of the market economy. Even the most precious values of liberal democracy in the West itself haven`t been left intact by the crisis. We are being exposed to all kinds of shocking revelations, the latest of which was the Snowden Affair. Twenty years ago this would have been inconceivable. At that time we would never have thought of asking ourselves whether we would prefer to be monitored by the Stasi or the American National Security Agency. These days it is reality.

Isn't it the case that the elites and ordinary people are living through the end of post-communism in different ways, and that a large part of the elite remain within post-communism? They believe in the future of liberal democracy, something that we may not have attained completely, but which we are supposedly moving in the direction of.

What actually makes elites so elite? Is it their position in the social hierarchy? What were elites like fifty years ago and what are they like these days? How do today's elites justify their status? Fifty years ago they legitimised themselves by referring to the national welfare state, be this in the democratic countries in the West or in the countries of real socialism in the East. Today's elites have to legitimise themselves by referring to the power structures of global capitalism. They appeal to the authority of international organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund, the European Union, the World Bank, NATO, etc. This is how they also legitimise their elite status and their indispensability. However, these organisations and institutions are outside of any democratic control. Traditionally, elites were concerned with the national culture and language. This is a 200-year old tradition, the tradition of the Enlightenment. Elites were to lead a nation to education, creativity and cultural progress in terms of the Enlightenment ideals. Today's elites are in a different situation. They operate within a transnational environment. They are the translators and mediators of power that is located outside of the societies in which they occupy their elitist position. They translate the hegemonic culture and discourses into their local idioms, and not only those ideas that defend capitalism, but also those that criticise it, usually in the form of theories anchored in the West and formulated in the one global language of both power and the critique thereof, namely English. However, the question is whether they are capable of reflecting critically upon their own position. This is a crucial question. I would say that they remain blind to their status for ideological and structural reasons. The political elites in the post-communist countries, in order to obtain their share of global development, are obliged to sell their working class as cheaply as possible. This is why they have to repress their workers, because otherwise capital will flow elsewhere. We find the same scenario everywhere. However, as we know it operates best in China.

In your book The End of Postcommunism you also write of the end of society. What do you mean by that?

This is not a question for a sociologist. Sociology presupposes the existence of society. I, on the other hand, argue that society, too, is a historical category. It was born in the 19th century, had a controversial, part glorious, part traumatic history in the 20th, and has in the meantime died. My thesis in the book is that it was not only socialism, but society as such that disappeared from our historical horizon. Twenty-five years ago I translated a book written in German by Alfred Lorenzer on psychoanalysis and social suffering, social pain, entitled *Intimität und soziales Leid. Archäologie der Psychoanalyse*. I am afraid that even the title no longer has any meaning. People still suffer, but they do so only individually, not socially. There is only an individual, no longer social pain, or if you like, the pain is neither felt as social nor as socially caused. We might remember what Margaret Thatcher said at the end of 1980s: "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families". She was right, not as a sociologist, but as a politician whose primary goal was to destroy society and, needless to say, she was a very successful politician. So society hasn't simply gone, it has been destroyed, it is in ruins, so we no longer feel it in the existential sense of the word. Is it possible to express this politically? Louis Althusser claimed that ideology operated on the basis of what he called the interpellation. His famous example is of a policeman who addresses a person on the street: "Hey, you there!" At the moment the person turns around and reacts to this call, they also become a subject. These days, if we addressed society and called out: "Hey you, society!", nobody would turn around, there would be no answer to our call. It is no longer possible to turn society into a subject of some kind. There are political parties, individuals, families, there are elites and underdogs, there are middle classes and oligarchs, not only in Russia but in the West too, there are citizens and migrants... There are many actors within something that once used to be society, which was sort of a container of all interactions. These days society isn't to be heard any more, it is silenced completely. This is of course related to the development of neoliberal capitalism. When Thatcher said that society didn't exist, she actually meant: I have successfully defeated all the forces which were defending society. I have defeated all the trade unions, I have dismantled almost all of the institutions of the welfare state and even turned the Labour Party into a force for neoliberal transformation. So where is your society now then?

As you see it then, society is a kind of corpse, or maybe a zombie.

French sociologist Bruno Latour describes society as a decaying whale, lying on a beach, giving off an unbearable smell. However, this automatically calls for us to look at society forensically, to examine it, but from the perspective of a post-mortem. In this way not only social research acquires a form of forensic research, which is necessarily retrospective, it also takes place not only within the sphere of culture that

is in a particular culture. What we used to call society still articulates itself today in culture. Culture now provides the language in which society expresses itself, since it has lost its own language. The discourse on society, which is today still very important, even predominant, reminds us of the situation with Latin and other classical languages in the Middle Ages. They were finalised as languages, attained their final shape and increased in importance exactly because they were dead. So long as they were alive we couldn't grasp them in their entirety, we couldn't embrace their wholeness and put their grammar on paper. So society today can also be grasped in its entirety only because it is already dead. Society still exists only in the knowledge of society, a knowledge that is articulated culturally. In other words, it exists in its cultural translations. You can learn its structure and grammar, but this is no longer something alive, something that speaks to us and something we can speak to, call for it to turn to us.

Is this why you speak so often of art? Does society now exist only in works of art?

In this sense art is fascinating. When I say this I'm not thinking primarily of artistic projects, but also of the way we think about them. It's interesting how Boris Groys links up art and history, for instance Stalinism and avantgarde art. Let's remind ourselves that in his Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin, poorly translated into English as The Total Art of Stalinism, Groys sees Stalinism as the consequence of the realisation of the artistic avantgarde project, and that for this reason

avantgarde art is totalitarian at its heart. So what we call totalitarianism is in fact an artistic project that unfortunately got realised! I'm not saying that Groys is either right or wrong, but rather I am pointing to the idea of a certain cultural practice becoming a monstrous social system, or in today's moralistic view of the past, a crime against humanity. Or take the example of the emergence of so-called East Art. Even prior to the fall of communism the Moscow conceptualists and the groups IRWIN, Laibach and Neue Slowenische Kunst were working with the concept of the East. For instance, IRWIN later created the East Art Map. At that time they identified completely with it, yet still wanted to be subversive and to create an alternative concept to the hegemony of Western art. They understood society and politics, as well as their own art, mainly in terms of the East-West opposition. In this case art cognitively functions like an aquarium. The ocean is impassable, never-ending, huge, beyond comprehension, has its deepest secrets, etc. However, in an aquarium we can see everything, we see small and large fish and how the latter eat the former. Similarly, in art we can suddenly observe how hegemony, so-called values, the acculturation of society, categories like East and West, etc. operate. I don't think that art is simply a symptom. Rather it is because art is delicate and soft, and so reality is imprinted on it more boldly, leaving traces in it that we can read.

In your book you see the disintegration of the Eastern bloc mainly as being connected with the end of the industrial era.

Yes. Not only communism disintegrated as a one party system and as an ideology. The whole historical phase called industrial modernity and the way of life typical of it came to an end symbolically with the end of communism. Across Europe we now find huge areas of wasteland, completely deserted former industrial complexes. As we know, industrial production has been relocated elsewhere. This should also be seen in relation to the political destruction of the European welfare state. The welfare state was based on factory workers, they were its human substratum and they disappeared. Capitalism was transformed, or rather the way that profit is generated changed. Industrial work found itself on the periphery of global capitalism. It is well known that the economic crisis of 2008 is a crisis of financial capitalism, not of industrial production. But the change involves the whole picture. Industrial production used to exert an essential influence on the entire life of a society, including its architecture, urbanism and healthcare and its economy of time. Just think of the famous three eighths, i.e. the day divided into 8 hours of sleep, 8 hours of work and 8 hours of cultural and entertainment activities. Now a new situation has arisen that poses many questions. This is not only the case of the former Eastern bloc. I was recently in Stockholm, where I participated in an exhibition that examined how the end of industrial modernity had impacted on Sweden, specifically on a working class district of Stockholm built at the turn of the 1960s and 70s for workers. This district offered a high standard of living and

a good quality urban and architectonic structure. And now no Swedish workers live there. Instead, immigrants from all around the world inhabit a sort of ghetto. We should remember that modernist projects intended to improve the social situation and the living standards of the working class were created on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Now, especially in Western urban areas, these districts have turned into ghettos that are completely isolated from society and have become epicentres of conflicts and violence, mostly motivated by cultural or religious differences, which we hardly understand and which are often completely out of state control. These are the symptoms of the profound transformation of social life as a consequence of the end of an industrial modernity that lasted for more than 150 years. In short, the collapse of communism must be seen within the context of the crisis of industrial modernity that has been shaping the life of today's generations over and above the division of the world into West and East.

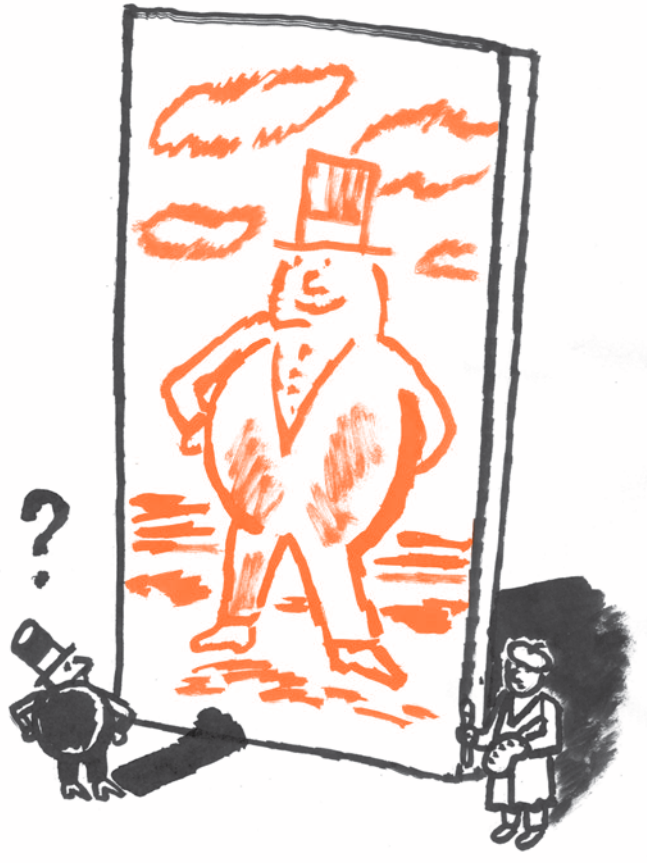
How should we react? Is the left not in the process of becoming simply one of many would-be subversive subcultures?

On the subject of these subversive subcultures let me point at an essential difference between the former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. In what was then Czechoslovakia people genuinely believed in the subversive power of pop culture, especially of rock music. This later became apparent, for instance, in the person of Václav Havel and his friendship with Lou Reed, whom he met in Prague at Hradcany and invited to dinner at the White House. These events symbolised the victory of a rock scene that was fighting against conservative communists. Some even say that the term "Velvet Revolution" is derived from the name of Lou Reed's band The Velvet Underground. In Yugoslavia the situation was inverted. The communist establishment of that time literally pressurised young people into alternative cultures – pop, rock, contemporary art, etc. – so as to prevent them from dabbling in politics, i.e. precisely in order not to be politically subversive. So the whole scene of alternative, pop and rock culture was not only allowed by the regime, it turned into a huge and lucrative industry. And finally, those democrats who came to power after the collapse of communism were far more conservative than the previous regime, under which this culture had freely flourished. In other words, pop and rock culture can be put to the most disparate ends, be they rightwing or leftwing, conservative or liberal.

The left today, insofar as it exists as a political subject, has no other option than to fight for hegemony. I understand this term in the way that the political scientist Ernesto Laclau does and not as a position of power within an already given society. Society in itself does not exist: it is always a result of a struggle for hegemony. Again, hegemony is not about having more power so as to be able to decide how society should live. It is about the very construction of society over and above the framework of traditional concepts of a national politics, or democracy

as a plurality of political parties. At stake is more than the crises of the concept of democracy in our traditional societies and nation states. For instance, we lack a genuine concept of transnational democracy. The possibility of living comfortably within the obsolete concepts of a democracy isolated within one society and one nation state is limited. For instance, it's verging on the tragic to observe elections in the United States. The whole world looks on and waits to see who the Americans will elect, because everyone knows it will have a huge impact on all of us. However, none of us, i.e. the majority of non-citizens of the USA, have any fundamental influence on these elections. So basically a small group of people decide the fate of the world. These are paradoxes that we should discuss openly. We should call into question the existing concept of democracy. It is a historical concept and not an immutable value or universal solution, as we were told it was during the Cold War. Democracy is exposed to historical contingency and its random vicissitudes. It is not a constant, but unfolds from what we are actually doing and is always subject to change.

Boris Buden (b. 1958) is a philosopher, translator and cultural theorist. He received his doctorate at Humboldt university and now lectures at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. During the 1990s he lived for many years in Zagreb, where he founded the Arkzin magazine and publishing house. He is the author of many essays and articles on philosophy, politics, art and broader cultural issues. He translated the works of Freud into Croatian. He is the author of The End of Post-Communism (2009). He lives in Berlin.



To not defer our politics to elsewhere
The Precarious Workers Brigade on precarity

You are active in your opposition to precarious working conditions, above all unpaid work. What is your strategy?

We focus on educating ourselves, through collective processes such as mapping, together with others affected by precarity and instability in work and private lives. We are proactive in contacting institutions offering unfair internship programmes, engage with students and graduates through workshops, and occasional talks, organise direct actions and support such actions carried out by groups that we support, within and beyond education, culture and the arts sector such as the Latin American Workers Association (LAWAS), and most of all, support each other in figuring all of this out.

What kind of people does your group attract?

Our group is mainly people who work within or around education and the arts, but also students, and current and past interns. People usually find us because they have experienced exploitation and are trying to understand what is happening to them, and want to fight back.

What group of the population is most at threat from precarity in London?

All groups, with the exclusion of the obvious well-off strata of society, are affected in one way or another. All labour is precarious, although some sectors (e.g.

the food industry & migrant workers) more than others, and now, due to the 'crisis' and 'austerity', even more so. We start our work from within the sectors we find ourselves in, but again, as above, we reach out where and when we can.

You are trying to organise self-employed workers. What problems are you encountering?

Rather than trying to 'organize' others we try to encourage people to join with us and to organize themselves. For example, we have been talking to students and staff at colleges where we have done 'de-professional development' workshops to try and tackle issues of internships and work placements within the colleges. Even in working this way of course, there are many obstacles.

The thing we are fighting – precarity – produces conditions that are also the main hurdles: a lack of time, energy, money, multiple work commitments leaving little time for meetings or even travelling to meetings, burn-out, health issues– including mental health, forced migration, visa issues, care duties all make it very difficult. These conditions can be linked more generally of course to any attempt at organizing a dispersed, urban workforce who work rather in a 'social factory' than at a factory production line.

We don't separate the pedagogical and organisational aspects of our work: for example, we try to denaturalise the situation we are in – internships for example as they exist now are a relatively recent phenomenon – it was not always this way, even though the rhetoric surrounding internships implies they are something everyone has had to go through. We point out that cultural workers earn less than the median wage in the UK. But perhaps most importantly, we try to work with the dilemmas people really inhabit – to acknowledge the desires, the romance and the idealism that often fuels us to carry on in this sector.

We believe it's important to start from where we are – to not defer our politics to elsewhere. We often hear people in our sector say that the real politics happen elsewhere – somewhere else and to other people. But we think it is important to start from where you are (as an artist, a cultural worker, a teacher, and so on) and make links transversally, first to broader systemic issues and then to other struggles and groups. We make support structures and shared spaces to re-think how our desires, which are currently directed into individualized, competitive, hierarchic modes of being, can instead be oriented toward other forms of common culture and work-based education. Even when it is difficult, people are dispersed and energies are low, we maintain bi-weekly meetings and keep things moving so people can come in and out of the process as their lives permit.

What about a situation in which people are aware of their own problems and those of society, but prefer to remain passive observers? What do you do? Is it enough simply to provide them with information?

Yes, consciousness raising is a part of what we do – and this is about changing attitudes. Even though

people may know there are problems, being able to voice them and see them as part of a systemic social issue rather than an individual one is the first step towards action. It can also help to get a better picture of how the systemic issues around precarity operate, build solidarity and determine what kind of actions are needed. We work from traditions of militant research, co-research and practices of feminist consciousness raising which precisely do not separate the production of knowledge from action. So instead of having a ready-made diagnosis of exploitation for instance, we work together to really understand what it is that we experience, what are the current mutations in our society that produce these conditions. From there we develop strategies and tactics such as direct action, letter writing and naming and shaming organizations with bad labour practices, and linking actions to broader social movements.

Do artists, writers and poets differ in any way from other precarious figures, e.g. graduate students, interns, migrants, auxiliary workers or labourers?

Not in terms of the general conditions of precarity. All the groups you mention face different issues specific to their own situation and context. There is something, however, about the idea of cultural work (and to some extent intellectual work in general) that seems to promise a kind of freedom and self-actualization in a way that working in say the service industry may not. Similarly, the artist is a symbol of someone led by a vocation, a calling, for whom creative work is more than 'just a job'. The desire to do something that you love can leave you open to being exploited. If you are willing to do anything in order to carry on making artwork (and the training as an artist is to put your artwork first before anything else), it can mean that you actively seek out short-term contracts, part-time work, work in the service industry in order to create time and space to do artwork as well as to support yourself. In fact, these identities are never pure – especially after the withdrawal of arts funding – many artists will be members of many of the groups you mention simultaneously working as artists, interns and service workers. How you frame the complexity of these working lives and the identities they produce is really important.

More and more artists are examining the issue of precarity in their artworks. Do you think this can be an effective weapon in the fight against precarity?

Precarity and broader political themes have become fashionable in the art world again. However, at the moment of being addressed, precarity often isn't examined within the institution and the 'project' and so often it is actually reproduced all over again. The radical content of an artwork is not enough for the piece to become an effective tool – there is a need to address the material conditions of production of the piece/event. We receive many invitations to take part in exhibitions where our work might appear like

an artwork. We generally turn down these invitations however, and have developed an open working code of ethics that allows us to make these decisions and keep us focused. When we do publish or take part in public events in the art context, we always address the material conditions of that situation by making sure that an info-box detailing the economies of production in a given case are made public.

Do you think the precariat is a new social class?
Our jury is out on this one. We can see that naming the precariat as a class might have strategic and analytic use at times, and in certain contexts, but it also has its potential dangers and limitations. Precarity describes a condition that has something to do not only with work, but also housing, and our lives – how we understand our futures and so on. It cuts across so many sectors, forms of life and work that it might actually lose its usefulness if it is pinned down in this way.

Precarious work can also offer something positive, especially the feeling of independence. People cherish their freedom and are willing to sacrifice a lot for it. Should this be criticised?
We are all aware of the banners in 1970s Italy that called for precarity against the discipline of the factory. The thing they and we are fighting for however, is precarity on our terms – not the governments, not the corporations, not the markets'. It doesn't make sense to code precarity morally 'good' or 'bad'. This is something that we speak to students about a lot when we go into colleges. A major concern for us is that there is always a danger that questioning and taking apart the 'system' can leave people paralysed and demoralised. As above, we need to acknowledge what motivates people to keep going in the sector but also include information regarding of other ways of working, other spaces, economies etc. and encourage people to devise practical modes of mutual support.

Do you cooperate with trade unions? How do you view their current activities in Great Britain?
We have often taken part in actions in solidarity with trade unions and have talked to some of them about issues around internships. Some of us are of course members of trade unions also and we support union activities and encourage people to join one if they can. One of the issues is that as a precarious worker or freelance worker there may not be a union that you are able to join, especially if you're not based in any particular physical location. Also, if you have multiple jobs/identities, it can be difficult to identify with a particular union.

Strikes and collective bargaining used to be the traditional way of protecting workers' rights. What tools do today's precarious workers have at their disposal?
This is the big question of course, a question that we can only figure out the answers to through committed collective experimentation. There is no point in relying on older tools that don't correspond to the

realities of our working lives today. We have been involved, for example, in discussions about a 'creative strike' and what this would mean, and debated the possibility of an intern strike in London, and we immediately hit all the barriers that such actions call up. There is so much fundamental work to be done to constitute ourselves first as a collective, even just a society that could imagine getting off the competition merry-go-round, one that could develop forms of mutual support that would allow us to strike, to make such a claim. That is where we are at right now.

What is your take on the basic income? Do you think it could resolve certain problems of precarious workers?

As a collective, we are generally in favour of basic income as an idea and an attempt to rethink relations between labour and income. The phenomenon of free labour tells us that the wage is no longer a guaranteed way of distributing wealth in our societies. And as feminists have always known, the demand for the wage is always interim – we want to be paid, but we also know that wage labour is inherently alienated. The debates around the unconditional basic income get at some of these issues, but we are a long way off being able to put this into practice in the UK at least.

What alternative would you envisage to the precarious present in terms of lifestyle and work?

Well, we can recall the early Marx with a half-day at work and an afternoon's fishing with philosophy reading groups in the evening! More seriously, we and many people we work with simply want a life with more dignity, with less harassment from the market, the bosses, the privatised unemployment office, the credit card company, the landlord. We want power and autonomy over our lives. Enforced austerity has closed down many of the gaps we could operate in before – the squats, the dole, the grant for a year here and there: so we feel this harassment, this lack of freedom, this withdrawal of dignity more acutely that ever now. Struggles against precarity are often lead by this ethical charge for 'a better life' where we are not all competing for meagre resources and forced to hang on by the skin of our teeth. A life and form of work that is not geared towards enriching and further entrenching the power of the wealthy would be a start.

Could you imagine working with a political party attempting resolve the situation of precarious workers? Or could you even establish such a party?

We have no interest in founding a political party. 'Single issue' political parties are not particularly effective and the UK has perhaps one of the least democratic political systems in Europe – the 'first past the post' two-party system leaves no space for smaller parties and succeeds in moving steadily rightward each year. And that is before you look at the legal corruption of the revolving door political and corporate classes, the return to power of the traditional upper ruling classes, the dominance of

right wing media ownership and so on. Having said this, there is a debate in Spain, Greece and other countries right now about how we shouldn't perhaps turn our backs entirely on representational politics, how we need to fight for that space too and stop the bleeding in the short term. As above, however, we feel that our task is the more basic work of building constituencies, understanding who 'we' are, what we want and how we can fight with others for more dignity and equality in our lives and work. The Zapatistas said once that in order to sit around a table of government they would have to first build that table together. That is perhaps closer to our aspiration right now.

Last question: revolution or reform of the system?

This is an old question that we would need to spend a lot of time taking apart before answering! Obviously tinkering around the edges of the system we abhor as it exists is not enough, but why is it right now that even the post-war concession of the welfare state seems like an impossible utopia? Debates in the 1990s around the 'making' of power versus the 'taking' of power (in the sense of storming the Winter Palace and so on) were important in that they emphasised the importance of pre-figuring the kind of society we want to live in the present, in the way we organise ourselves today in the here and now. There is no point in deferring justice, equality and so on until 'after the revolution'. In our organising and collectivity, we have to build another society already today in how we relate to each other, how we act in the world. The micropolitics of this must go hand in hand with macropolitical strategies, alliances and social movements. It is always two steps, everyday reform and revolution.

The group questioned stipulated that the following information be published. The interview was conducted with the financial support of the Academic Research Centre of the Academy of Fine Arts and the cultural fortnightly periodical A2. Barbora Kleinhamplová received CZK 500 for the work associated with the interview and Tereza Stejskalová receives a monthly income of CZK 10,000 for her editorial work for A2.

The Precarious Workers Brigade is a London collective whose members work in the academic and cultural sphere. The group was formed in 2008 and campaigns for free university education and against unwaged labour. At present it is mainly involved in a campaign against unpaid work experience and internships. Along with the Carrotworkers' Collective, it has compiled a manual entitled Surviving Internship: A Counter Guide to Free Labour in the Arts, and the publication Training for Exploitation? Towards an Alternative Curriculum.

It’s art-politics
Artur Żmijewski on the reform of exhibition institutions

You brought activists from various political movements to the Berlin Biennale. However, they criticised the hierarchical structure of the exhibition. At its conclusion they mutinied and you surrendered the function of curator. How does the whole of this situation relate to your participation in the art-activist group Winter Holiday Camp, which recently intervened in the Ujazdów Castle Centre for Contemporary Art?

In 2011, when we invited these political movements, for instance Indignados and Occupy Museums, to cooperate on the biennale, they were at their peak. My colleague Igor Stokfiszewski travelled to Madrid, Paris and other cities and tried to strike up contacts. It was a long drawn out process. When the activists accepted the invitation and arrived in Berlin, they were unfortunately placed in the main hall of the Kunstwerke Gallery. This was supposed to provide them basic facilities. However, they felt they were being exhibited. They told me: “It’s like we’re in the zoo, it’s undignified.” They are free, dignified people who cannot be manipulated.

What was your experience of the confrontation and the fact that the biennale was wrenched from your grasp?

During the biennale the activists organised protests. One took place in front of the Berlin Guggenheim

Museum. I think I'm right in saying that an exhibition was underway there of the work of Roman Ondák, winner of the Deutsche Bank Artist of the Year award. This is one of the prominent institutions in the city. It has a budget of USD 200,000 per exhibition and the works exhibited automatically become part of its collection. A large crowd gathered in front of the gallery and the situation was monitored by the police. I don't know what Roman Ondák had to say about all of this. What did happen was that a discussion took place between me and the activists and we agreed on a particular course of action. Everyone would submit a proposal and we would see if we could reach some form of agreement. They proposed that I and other curators resign our position so that we did not operate as middlemen between them and the institutions.

What was your proposal?

Mine was similar in some ways. I proposed that we become co-curators and bear joint responsibility. However, they were more radical. It was then that I realised how difficult it is to relinquish power. When you have power you can manipulate people, spend money, draw on various resources, galleries, etc. The entire process continued here in Warsaw.

Was there a difference in the way people reacted in Berlin and Warsaw?

The whole of this activist movement has its history. Various working groups were created in New York as part of the Occupy Wall Street movement. One of these was Occupy Museums. Its members organised various protests, for instance in the New York Museum of Modern Art. Joanna Warsza, who curated the biennale with me, first met the activists there and conducted an interview with them. They told her that they wanted to intervene in the operations of exhibition institutions regardless of whether the gallery in question agreed or not. We decided to invite them to Berlin and open the doors to them of an institution so that they could do as they wished. We didn't want to obstruct them in any way.

The situation in Warsaw is slightly different. Over the course of last year, I and several activists who were also involved with the Berlin Biennale discovered that a fierce conflict was underway between the management and employees of the Centre for Contemporary Art based in Ujazdów Castle. We got in contact with the employees and began collaborating with them. In September they held a public protest that included trade unions, and we participated. We obtained access to the institution via the employees and not the management. However, the Occupy Museums movement in New York is also concerned with other issues, for instance artists' debts.

We've been speaking of galleries. However, there are other institutions involved, governmental, educational, etc. While we might have access to artistic institutions, we cannot change political parties, for instance. We're not sufficiently strong for that.

If you had the opportunity to reform a political party, would this take precedence over cooperating with a gallery?

Possibly. Our institutions are characterised by a pyramidal structure. At the top there's a manager. Down a level there are his or her deputies, and on the bottom layer there are the rank-and-file workers. Political parties operate in the same way, though obviously on a more complex basis. However, in Poland especially this structure is very apparent. A culture of leaders enjoys power here. Politicians are quite happy to admit that the leadership principle is the best we have. There are parties here that openly admire Viktor Orbán. We would like to have some influence on this way of structuring things, but unfortunately this isn't possible. On the other hand, artistic institutions are used to dealing with people who have strange ideas. Consequently they are more open and transparent. You can destroy things and initiate the totally unexpected.

Activists in Berlin attempted to put elements of direct democracy into practice. Are you attempting something similar at the Castle?

It's not completely possible, because the relationship between the director and the rest of the team is very problematic. There's almost no communication. We could propose a horizontal structure for the organisation, but there is nobody on the management who would listen to us. You ask the Castle director how he perceives democracy, and he'll tell you he doesn't believe in it. If you ask what he believes in, he's unable to reply. He's not a very good director. He appears not to think about things.

How does the local art community view the protests and events at the Castle?

Everyone knows about them. But they only talk about them among themselves and not in public. I think this is part of the problem. It's not being discussed in the media. We're seeing a certain shift in the direction of conservatism, not only in Poland but around the world. In the 1990s there was a very active art scene here called "critical art". So many artists adopted critical stances that curators began to use this term of them. These days art relates only to "images". Artists are not interested in the surrounding reality. They are simply concerned with their own imagination, fantasies, surrealism, visual poetry, etc. This has been the prevailing tendency over the last thirteen years. But now everybody, including curators, is bored by it, even though you can sell it. How long is it possible to continue talking about surrealism? I hope we see a return to reality soon.

Is this related in any way to the political situation in Poland? I'm thinking about the rise of certain nationalist tendencies, for instance the very aggressive march by nationalists through Warsaw in autumn…

I was talking to Jakub Banaszek, one of the most important Polish art critics. He told me that in the 1990s, after the fall of communism, many questions had to be answered. These days things have changed and people don't see these problems. They simply don't exist for them. Let's hope that artists will again be more sensitive to questions relating to

society. In the case of the intervention in the Castle, it was actually Paweł Althamer who initiated the entire event. It was originally his artistic project, and then we basically came along and usurped it.

What is your concept of an ideal gallery? What should it look like and how should it operate in society?

I don't know. There are various models. Some are genuinely functional and both the people who visit them and the people who work in them are satisfied. We're trying to gather together as much information as we can. For instance, the Museum of Art in Łódź, one of the first art collections in Poland, also has a pyramidal structure. However, there is an internal group comprising the director and curators who decide on the programme together. They have put together a quality control manual. Right from the start they tried to ensure that the institution operated on more rational principles. They tried to understand what each person could do. They tried to avoid a situation in which the work of individual employees overlapped. They are trying to ensure that everyone knows exactly what they are responsible for. They are also trying to improve working relationships. For instance, they have a rule that nobody can shout at anyone else. Of course, conflicts take place. But in general the atmosphere is better and people are happier. The problem is that Łódź is a city with a whole load of problems. The population is falling and unemployment is increasing. It used to be a German, Jewish and Russian city, but those times are long gone. The

Museum is not much involved in these issues. It has its own internal model of operations that leads to very good, world famous exhibitions. But on the other hand it is blind to its immediate surroundings.
We are investigating various models. This includes historical museums, which in Poland are used as political instruments. We have a museum of communism, a museum of history, etc. A few years a Museum of the History of Polish Jews was created in Warsaw. The people in charge don't have an easy life, because the Poles refuse to cooperate with the installation of exhibitions. People from abroad have to be contacted and this complicates the museum's operations. In addition, politicians believe that the story being presented by the museum isn't "Polish" enough – apparently we've again been occupied by Jews and their opinions. And so they create various obstacles, either consciously or unconsciously. The specialists who should be working there are uninterested, because they don't want any problems. Andrzej Cudak was made director, someone who used to work on the European Football Championship 2012 and knows nothing about the Polish Jews or history. There was a wave of opposition to the move and a historian was then appointed the new director. Nobody is denying he has the qualifications, but the question is how he will relate to the employees. Everyone agrees that gallery employees aren't important – you simply have to have a good director and top quality exhibitions.

You have said that artistic institutions are arguably more open than other institutions. Do you believe that a model of an artistic institution could be found that could function as a kind of vanguard for other institutions?

Definitely. That's what we're about. But we don't know how to set about doing it. It's not simply about setting up a horizontal structure. It's not enough simply to replace one director with a group of managers. We want to find a different kind of model along with Castle employees and the whole team. It involves a process, and we ourselves are developing politically thanks to this process. I reckon that a good model would include an organic, flexible component that would promote experimentation. Up till now similar institutions have had fixed rules, so let's try something different. If we experiment, maybe we'll arrive at something more suitable. This would be a kind of endless revolution that was always open to new changes. We're trying to use the instruments of the Occupy movement, e.g. assemblies and working groups, discussions and interviews, in which people are not under the control of anything or anyone. At the same time we want to avoid a situation in which someone does something that renders any further development impossible. We want a non-violent type of discussion that leads to decisions. These kinds of methods work.

So you're trying to apply these originally informal methods of activist movements within an institutional environment?

Yes. Though it's not that simple. We created a group called the Winter Holiday Camp in order to criticise the Centre for Contemporary Art. And yet it was we

who founded the institution. We are not just individuals or a group of activists. We are trying to a find a space common to both us and the Castle. The institution needs a second institution.

Can the general public, which usually expects a more or less intelligible programme of exhibitions from galleries, be integrated into this communication?

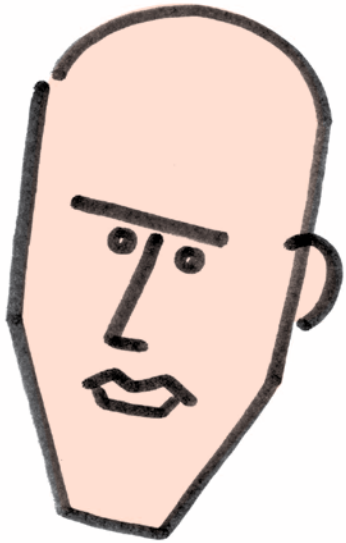
Yes. There's no problem with a conservative exhibition programme. We're not seeking global revolution. When we met the people from the Castle, we said: ok, the current director might be sacked, but what then? One idea was that it would be best if absolutely everyone left. But this would be cruel and destructive, because these people are highly qualified. It would be far better to work on something together with them and with activists and journalists, because communication with the public is not so problematic. I don't know what the situation in Prague is like, but in our country people understand that art can be procedural, that it isn't only about the final outcome. It would be interesting to integrate the general public into such a process.

How do you yourself approach events such as the Berlin Biennale or the intervention at the Ujazdow Castle, which are based on a certain activist desire? You speak of events at the Castle as art. Is it art? Is it your art?

It's difficult to say. These activities are based on artistic strategies, i.e. a certain imagination that is peculiar to artists. It takes place in the cultural sphere, though it could be also used as a political tool. It's art-politics, politics-art, politart. However, the real problem, if we're going to think pragmatically, relates to money. To make a living from art we'd have to create conservative art, i.e. objects, films, photography, drawings, sculpture, etc. As far as the intervention at the Castle Ujazdow is concerned, although there was documentation made, i.e. artefacts, how could you sell it? Who owns it? Who'd buy it? Who's interested in it?

The way I see it, at present my life is divided into two spheres. One comprises art and money. The other comprises politics and art activism and doesn't make any money. Right now I see no way of connecting up these spheres. Not even my activities for Krytyka Polityczna [Political Critique] are financed in any way. They published my book of interviews, but I received no money for it. That's how things operate in my case.

Artur Żmijewski (b. 1966) is a Polish artist, curator and activist. From 1990 to 1995 he studied at the Grzegorz Kowalski studio at the Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw. During the 1990s he was one of the best known figures of the "critical art" generation. He published a collection of interviews with like minds entitled Drżące ciała. Rozmowy z artystami (Trembling Bodies. Interviews with Artists, 2007). His film Powtórzenie (Repetition) represented Poland at the Venice Biennale in 2005. His best know work includes Eye for Eye (1998), Singing Lesson 2 (2003), They (2007), and Democracy (2009). In 2012 he curated the Vienne Biennale. Since 2006 he has been artistic editor at the publishing arm of the Polish leftwing movement Krytyka Polityczna.



This is the nature of democratic time
Igor Stokfiszewski on revolutionary moments and cultural institutions

The wave of social movements that swept across Southern Europe in 2011 left a deep impression on Igor Stokfiszewski, Polish theatre and literary critic, member of the Polish leftwing movement Krytyka Polityczna [Political Critique], and part of the 7th. Berlin Biennale team. We spoke about the democratic reform of institutions.

How did your collaboration with Artur Żmijewski come about?

Artur is trying to create politically effective artistic interventions. He realised that it would be a good idea to combine forces with activists and political organisations and include them in his artistic activities. This is why he has been working for a long time with Political Critique, which is where we got to know each other. Since 2007 we have collaborated on a number of occasions. Eventually he invited me to join the team preparing the Berlin Biennale.

What was your task in the Biennale?

Among other things I was co-responsible for the cooperation between the Biennale and social movements, especially those from Southern European countries.

How did the collaboration come about?

We wanted to invite various activist and political groups into the Kunstwerke Gallery. That was in 2010. However, shortly afterwards the revolutionary wave of 2011 began. First there was the Arab Spring, then Southern Europe, etc. We felt that all of this was very important. I travelled to Spain and spoke to the people gathered on the square. We participated in the protest events and helped many different activists, for instance during the march to Brussels. Wherever things were happening we were always present, creating contacts, and this is how our collaboration began.

Why did you want these movements to participate at the Biennale?

We wanted to know whether cultural institutions such as the Berlin Biennale could support social movements seeking political change, and if so, then how. And so we contacted the people from these movements. We said to them: "We have financial resources, a place in Berlin, and some experience of artistic and political activities. How can we help you?" They replied that they would like to operate in the capital of Germany and an important centre of the European Union. They said that if we offered them a base, assistance, and different kinds of support that would up-scale their actions, they'd come. Joanna Warsza flew to the US and spoke with members of the Occupy Wall Street as well as activists with the Occupy Museums initiative, and they also came to Berlin, where we all began organising various different events.

What kind of relationship did the activists have with the gallery and the Biennale itself?

The people protesting in the streets included many artists and cultural workers. When all is said and done, artists are people who work under pretty precarious conditions. Many of the activists had experience communicating with cultural institutions. However, some, especially those from Occupy Museums, felt that we should be more uncompromising regarding the institution of the Biennale. That's why we tried to transform the Kunstwerke Gallery into a more horizontal structure. We organised meetings participated in by both the employees and the director, etc. It only lasted two weeks. We knew that it wouldn't affect the operations of Kunstwerke as we would ideally like it to. Even so, certain ideas and proposals put forward during those two weeks were subsequently implemented and the event as a whole had a certain impact.

Was this the impetus behind your current activist intervention in the Ujazdów Castle?

This was a new opportunity. Fabio Cavallucci, director of the castle, invited Paweł Althamer to organise an event involving children based on the ideas of Janusz Korczak, a Polish educationalist and pre-war director of the Warsaw Jewish Orphanage. Paweł agreed and wanted the children to occupy the castle. After the Biennale was over, it occurred to Paweł that it would be interesting to include adults as well as children. So he contacted Artur, who again brought activists and members of social movements to Warsaw. The

original aim was the complete transformation of a cultural institution that would be led by children and participated in by the employees. The institution's operations were to be suspended for two months. People wouldn't work there and everyone would participate in the transformation. Over the course of last year we created the group Winter Holiday Camp and travelled to the castle. However, we found there was a serious conflict taking place between the director and the employees. Cavallucci possessed slightly monarchist airs and graces. He didn't respect the curators and other workers and refused to accept any kind of democratic debate. The employees started to look like slaves of the king of the castle. They began to stand up for their rights with the aid of trade unions, and they even appealed to the Ministry of Culture. But this wasn't very effective. In addition, not many people from outside the castle got to know of the dispute. When we arrived, we began by communicating with the employees and we wanted to bring in the children. We wanted to create the kind of situation we were familiar with from social movements. We wanted to use the methods of direct democracy these movements had pioneered. But it was impossible. The situation was very tense.

How did the conflict reach the attention of the public?

In the first phase of preparations, we set ourselves a precondition: everything we did would be transparent and we would publish all documents at our disposal. Suddenly we had to act responsibly, to think about what we were saying, to write down what we were signing, etc. The employees were clearly inspired by this and during September and October decided to publish all the documents in their possession that bore witness to the entire situation, a situation that had now been going on a year and a half. It transpired that Cavalluci was struggling to control the budget and put together a programme, and was humiliating the castle employees, i.e. around a hundred people. We decided to release a statement. We wrote an open letter, in which we supported the employees and offered our assistance. We offered democratic tools that we had learned how to use and that could help reform the institution. We began writing articles and holding press conferences, and we tried to raise the media profile of the entire affair.

How did Cavallucci react?

He began arguing with us about whether the Winter Holiday Camp could or could not go ahead in the castle. In the end he decided that we were no longer welcome and that the project would not be realised. We took this as an attempt to exert his power, and so we decided that we would remain and continue to cooperate with the employees, i.e. with those who were interested in cooperation. The problem was that some were afraid they'd lose their jobs and others were simply uninterested. They didn't regard the castle as being something worth fighting for. However, there was a very active group of employees who cooperated intensively with us and gradually became an integral part of the Winter Holiday

Camp. We began to organise joint interventions in the operations of the castle. We created the installation entitled "Institution in Crisis" and we wanted to donate it to the castle collection. This was no easy matter, but in the end we managed it. We invited people to the public opening of an exhibition of the CCA collection of contemporary art. Cavalluci hadn't wanted there to be a private view because the exhibition was organised quickly in order to help the castle operate without funds for new initiatives: the budget was empty. We wrote an open letter to the Ministry of Culture. Inside the castle we organised meetings with the employees and with people from outside that we had invited. Even Cavallucci attended some of these meetings, because he couldn't afford to ignore what was going on.

Was there nobody there who absolutely disagreed with you or tried to block you in any way?
No. But this was also because after three years of the system that reigned in the castle, most people were resigned and passive. However, some of the discussions were fantastic. Of course, from time to time someone would say that the whole thing was a trick and that Political Critique wanted simply to acquire some kind of political or symbolic capital from the event. That's normal.

What happened to the children?
We dropped the idea when it became clear that we would not receive the institution's approval for the entire project. But I liked the idea. The idea of following the children around appealed to me. Isn't it a genuinely democratic gesture? It's easy to follow the activities of employees or trade unions, but a completely different matter to apply this to children. It's radical. It was Paweł's idea, and that's not just because he has children of his own and understands them. You could say that through them he rediscovered his childlike ego at an advanced age. It's amazing to see how he is inspired by the special logic of children. He's genuinely capable of acting like a child, of playing and fantasising. It wouldn't have worked without him. We knew that we could rely on him and that he knew what he was doing. There were two reasons for working with children. On the one hand, it was a radically democratic gesture, as I've already said. And on the other, we wanted to find a way of "softening up" the castle. The building itself is not exactly cosy and we felt we had to find a way of bringing it to life.

After your experiences with the castle and the Berlin Biennale, do you still believe that it is possible to introduce elements of direct democracy to cultural institutions? And why exactly to cultural institutions?
I think it's possible to introduce such elements within all institutions. I myself operate in the cultural sphere, and so I try to make changes here. However, I believe that all institutions should be permeated with the spirit of democracy. We know of cultural institutions that are managed on a horizontal basis. In 2011, several were occupied and their operations were radically transformed. Examples do exist.

For instance?

My favourite is the Teatro Valle in Rome, which has been occupied since 2011. I've been there and experienced it. We invited several people from Rome to Warsaw and they met the people from the castle. They offered us some really valuable pieces of advice. But there's a catch. Teatro Valle was occupied mainly by activists, actors and artists, i.e. people from outside. The employees were in a minority, and this of course makes things easier. The castle has a hundred employees and many of them have been working there for years and years. It's a completely different situation. I still believe that it is possible to introduce some form of direct democracy. But it's going to be a long haul. However, I'm not sure whether this is the real aim. The main aim should be to provide subjectivity to the employees, artists and general public.

What does that mean?

People should have the opportunity to reach decisions on the basis of consensus, between themselves, as regards how they should work in the institution, how the institution itself should operate, and what type of art and culture should take place there. At present, the castle is ruled by fear, opportunism and passivity, and this is the consequence of several years of institutional dictatorship.

Who should be present at these meetings? Should they include potential viewers?

Certainly. Who else do cultural institutions belong to? If we know who they are, we should invite all the owners to participate in the decision-making process. The castle is a national gallery open to the public. In a certain sense culture represents public assets and belongs to everyone, it isrepresents the commons. But there exists another type of affiliation. During the course of our events many people from both inside and outside the institution appeared for whom the gallery really meant something. Of course, this included a large number of the employees. In many cases their lives are closely linked with the castle. They identify with it and suffer when they see how it is being harmed. And then there are artists who have cooperated or are cooperating with the gallery. For many of them this was a key space in the 1990s and they have wonderful memories of it. And then there are the activists and the general public interested in culture and cultural institutions. Finally there's the Ministry of Culture.

Is there a discussion in Poland regarding cultural institutions, how they should operate ideally, what their function is, etc.?

I believe the situation in the castle provoked that kind of discussion, as did the recent scandal involving the National Theatre in Krakow centered on a play dealing with Polish anti-Semitism. The media takes up these affairs and discussions take place in public places. The rightwing and nationalists cry out that they don't want public money spent on this kind of thing. Three or four months ago they also intervened in the castle, which put us in a double bind. We were trying to get Cavallucci to leave. But all of

a sudden, if he had gone, it could have been interpreted as a concession to nationalists and censorship. Their event was far more popular in the media. They came to the castle and for five days they prayed in front of a video by Jack Markiewicz showing a naked man rubbing himself against a statue of Christ. The rightwing parties used this as a pretext for their fight against culture, art, etc. We didn't know what to do. This is another reason why Calvallucci remained director for a couple of months after our intervention, even though although it was clear that we had won and that he'd soon be out of his function.

Do you yourself have some idea of what direction things should move in?

Yeah, but that's not so important. The biggest challenge is to offer other people subjectivity. It's difficult. It's frustrating trying to introduce democratic procedures when people don't have respect for each other, shout at each other, etc. For me the most important thing is to reach decisions regarding the gallery on a joint basis. If we had the possibility of organising meetings that included the employees and the general public for a year, let's say two meetings a month, and if we could create working groups and deal with various problems arising, I believe that it would be possible to arrive at a certain model of reform. The first step would be to meet with people willing to become active co-facilitators of the entire process.

What would be the role of expert in all of this? There are people who have spent years and years studying art history, production, curatorship, etc. If we introduced a horizontal structure in institutions, suddenly their words would only carry the same weight as everyone else's. In which case, what would be the point of an expert education?

None. It's more a matter of arrogance. I know many specialists who aren't arrogant and are willing to become a productive link in the entire chain and stop being "specialists".

The events at the Berlin Biennale and the Ujazdow Castle were international. Activists from around the world participated. How well were foreign activists able to understand what are basically local problems?

Basically I think that all European cultural institutions are facing similar problems. It was important for us because in Poland we don't have the same experience with direct democracy as they have, for instance, in New York. These methods are a very important contribution to the entire process. It's also a bit provocative. People from the castle, and others as well, asked us: "Why are people coming from New York? After all, it's the Polish National gallery!" Well, except that the director is Italian, isn't he...? It was a little strange.

Does the experience of direct democracy you have outlined also influence Political Critique itself and the way it is organised?

Sometimes I feel like an extraterrestrial. My experience of Spain from 2011 might have come from

Mars. Suddenly you see that all of these instruments and methods work. Political Critique cooperates with people from Spain and Italy, etc. However, we can see that the revolutionary moment has gone. Instead of 99% against the 1%, here we have 1% fighting against a different 1%, which in turn claims to represent the rest. When I returned from Berlin to our Warsaw office, I was full of enthusiasm and wanted to initiate a democratic revolution. I discovered that the others didn't exactly see eye to eye with me. They hadn't experienced what I had and had different ideas. I was frustrated for a while, but then I realised that if I wanted to make the most of the greatest successes enjoyed by these movements, I would have to be capable of providing subjectivity to other people from the organisation. It's not about launching an off-the-shelf revolution or applying a readymade strategy, but marching shoulder to shoulder with other people on the basis of decisions reached via consensus.

The methods of direct democracy deployed by movements from 2011, the meetings and decisions reached on the basis of consensus, are sometimes criticised for being ineffective, for failing when they come up against a cynical regime. What would you say in response?

What would you say in response?

It's difficult to say. We've never experienced direct democracy. It sounds wonderful and we'd like to try it. On the other hand, we have doubts.

Given ever increasing social tensions and inequality, it seems that the other side is winning, and that it behaves in a more cynical, pragmatic way. Nationalistic tendencies are increasing, etc. Can the drawn-out debates associated with direct democracy be effective in our situation? Perhaps we shouldn't completely give up the model of representation...

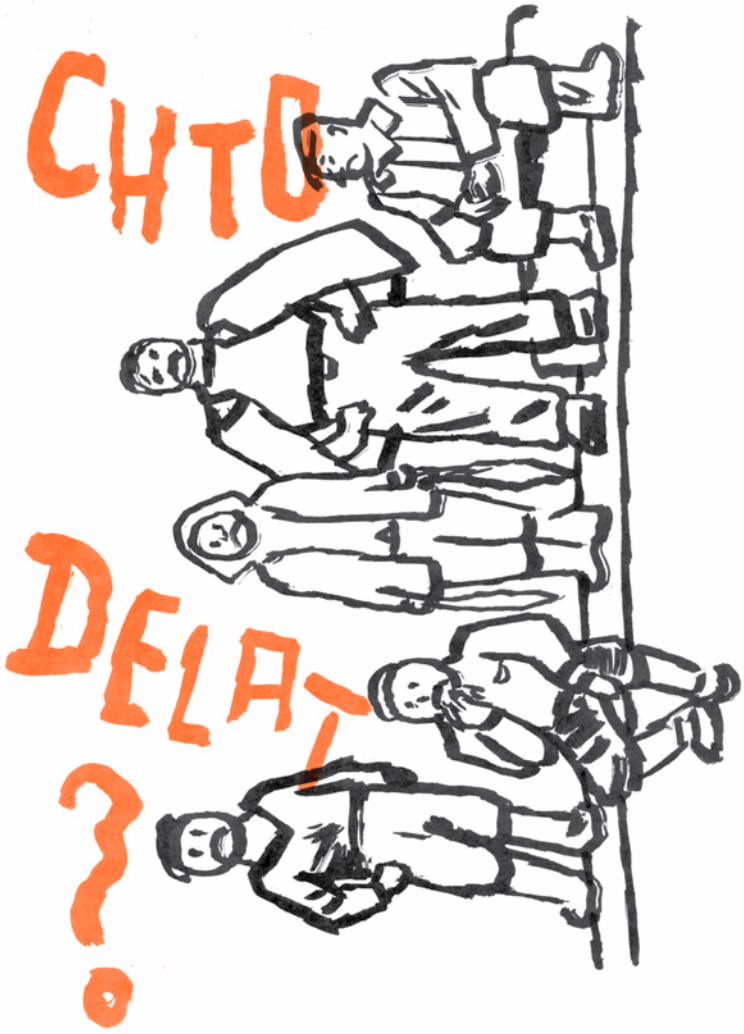
But effective from what perspective? There's a well known story about the Zapatistas and the Mexican government. They were sitting around a table. The government representatives put forward their proposals and waited for a response. The Zapatistas took the proposals and wanted to take them home to discuss them at meetings with their peoples. Then they would announce the result. The government representatives were angry and said that they didn't have the time. However, the Zapatistas retorted that this was the nature of democratic time. I believe it is mistaken to confront effectiveness and ethics. What type of effectiveness can be achieved? It's not about running on the spot just because everything must be resolved at meetings. You have to know what type of decision is appropriate to assemblies that gather together all those subjects the decision would affect, and what type to individuals. But you always have to act in accordance with a certain code of ethics. My experience from Southern Europe taught me that the more people participate in a certain decision and the fewer of them are given no option but to fall in line, even though the decision may impact significantly on their lives, the better.

I remember the large demonstration on 15 October 2011. Protests took place all over Europe. I was in Brussels and was on one of them, after which a meeting took place in a park. There were maybe 10,000 people there. Anyone who wanted to speak joined a queue. About a thousand people were interested and the queue was really long. They had a microphone and everything was translated into four languages. These were people who had never before had the opportunity to speak in front of such a crowd, who had never been listened to by anyone, perhaps because they weren't specialists in anything. It was as though they underwent a physical transformation. They didn't speak for long and nobody prattled on about life and death. Everyone in the queue was very patient. They understood that it had to be this way. This is what I have in mind when I speak of providing subjectivity. People speak and are happy that they are being listened to, that what they are saying is important for the others. They can decide about their own fate and cooperate with other people and join events and then genuinely act on these decisions. That's amazing. But I'm afraid that it'll never return.

Never return?

I don't think so. I'll say one more thing. In July 2011, there were marches from four different places in Spain on Madrid. Everyone was supposed to meet in Puerta del Sol, the main square in Madrid, at 9pm. I was there with many others and waited impatiently for around half a million people attending the square to arrive. Then I heard the sound of voices, music and drums, and I realised they were arriving. Suddenly the streets leading to Puerta del Sol were filled with people singing and dancing. I was shocked and deeply moved. At the same time I was convinced that it was unlikely I would ever experience anything similar to this again. There are revolutionary momentums and long hard years of grass-roots work afterwards. We are in the process of implementing in social relationships as many democratic procedures invented in the squares during the revolution as possible. It brings joy and satisfaction, but it's not the same as the Brussels assembly or the Madrid marches.

Igor Stokfiszewski (b. 1979) is a literary and theatre critic specialising in politically engaged art. Since 2006 he has been a member of the Polish leftwing movement Political Critique, where he works as activist, editor and journalist. He was a member of the team overseeing the 7th .Berlin Biennale (2012). He is author of the book Zwrot polityczny (The Political Turn, 2009).



Art speaks to people who don't yet even exist. The group Chto Delat? [What is to be Done?] on the current role of the intellectual

Your exhibition in Prague is called Anti-anticommunism. Could you explain what this term means?

Dmitrij Vilensky: We hope it's clear. Originally we had no idea what awaited us here in Prague. Of course, we could always have exhibited our older work. But then we began thinking about why we haven't been here for so many years, why nobody invites us here, why nobody ever invites us to countries of the former Eastern bloc. The answer is simple: we are openly leftwing and we often speak about leftwing politics, communism, and so on. And that's not considered acceptable here. There's a strong antipathy to communism here.

Nikolaj Olejnikov: But isn't the situation similar in Russia? For many years people there also hated us for being openly leftwing.

D.V.: I wouldn't compare the two situations. It's simply a different context. Russia is the most tolerant of all countries of the former Eastern bloc to anything Soviet. Soviet history is part of Putin's ideology.

N.O.: Except that's the problem. They took over Stalinism, imperialism, etc. from the Soviet legacy.

D.V.: Fine. But it's still different to the situation in Hungary or Estonia, for instance, where you can't demonstrate with a flag showing the hammer and sickle because it's a crime. When you speak about communism in those countries, it's like speaking

about fascism in Russia. That's why we decided not to approach things directly, but in the form of anti-anticommunism. We believe in the dialectic, the double negation. In Poland we recently organised an exhibition entitled Negation of the Negation, and this represents a continuation. In London you can create an exhibition called Communism and nobody's up in arms about it. In Prague the exhibition had to be about anti-anticommunism.

Do you think that art can be therapeutic and heal the trauma of communism?

N.O.: It's actually the only way of standing up to it. The trauma left by the past, the bureaucracy and the repression which all progressive left-wingers were always against, is still with us. I believe in the power of art, though not as therapy, but rather a way of approaching this trauma, reacting to it and communicating with it.

Isn't it a bit sad? Art usually speaks only to the elites.

N.O.: That's a different question. We believe that art belongs to everyone.

D.V.: I believe that art represents one of the ways of coming to terms with anticommunism. I'm obviously not speaking of propaganda, but of art that is capable of handling a certain dramaturgy.

We have a long period of reactionary government behind us and we ourselves are not exactly spring chickens. That's why we're sceptical when people expect big changes overnight. It's a kind of business logic. At present, we can see that on many levels the political struggle is simply not operating. At the same time I believe that universities and cultural institutions could play a key role in the transformation of the ruling ideology. Because if the ideology doesn't change, the person doesn't change. In this sense I'm more of an idealist. People say that changes in the forces of production have to come first, and yet at present we are experiencing huge changes in production...

N.O.: ... and nothing's come of it.

D.V.: Paolo Virno, Antonie Negri, these would say that conditions are better for communism than ever before. Cooperation, the commons ... However, Virno speaks of the communism of capital. Without transforming this communism of capital into communism for everyone, it will be difficult to move forward.

From what position do you make your interventions in the situation in the Czech Republic? Are you examining anticommunism as someone from the East who shares a similar experience, or as artists and intellectuals who are part of a Western leftwing theoretical discourse?

D.V.: We certainly have a network of similarly minded people around us and we've participated at various conferences on communism organised by Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek.

N.O.: But we're most interested in the historical fact, in perceiving communism within a local context. In Czechoslovakia opposition to the Soviet regime mainly came from loyal members of the Communist

Party. I have in mind the secret Vysočany Congress, i.e. the organisation of communist opposition to the Soviet invasion. For sure Havel and his satellites eventually adopted a different, simpler ideology. But there was important resistance here to the Soviet regime that was communist in nature, and we tend to forget this. One of the August slogans was: "Lenin, wake up, Brežněv has gone mad". In other words, people were calling for real Leninism, real communism. The same was the case during perestroika in Russia. At present, everyone's suddenly convinced that neoliberalism is simply the natural state of affairs. Wake up people, this isn't true! What we have now may seem natural, but forty years ago it wasn't like that. So is our entry onto the local scene a kind of invasion of sorts or an attempt to rethink the communist past, present and future? How should we conceive of the communist opposition to communism? Does communism mean the gulag, or should it be something different?

It seems to me that an important question in your work relates to the social role of the artist/intellectual. In one of your workshops entitled "Where has communism gone?" I was surprised by the gloomy vision of his fate. In this play he actually operated as a kind of psychoanalyst, who explains to those around their desires and dreams linked with communism. But when he implies that change is not such a simple matter, the people around kill him. Do you think this is the fate of the intellectual at present?

N.O.: The intellectual must under all circumstances criticise society, and he or she pays a large price for this.

D.V.: Leftwing people are often nostalgic for communism. Everyone loves each other, money doesn't exist, flowers are everywhere, the climate is mild, etc. But we refuse to be bound by this idealistic image. We know from history that communism isn't attractive and that, on the contrary, it can be horrible and cruel. It's interesting how communism relates to the idea of the sublime. It's something alluring yet dangerous, something that could destroy you. However, humanity can't get rid of it. If we did, if we stopped wanting to confront this danger, then humanity's entire mission would be lost, nothing would make sense. The role of the intellectual at present consists in the ability to interrogate such complex, dangerous concepts. Most liberals, and even some anarchists, believe that humans are basically good and that under certain conditions we can all get on well, communicate, like each other, etc. In reality people are not angels but complex beings. We have to face up to this complexity. People can be cruel and violent and we have to confront this fact. The term sublime contains within itself violence, but a violence that we are longing to confront.

But don't you sometimes have the feeling that that nobody listens to intellectuals? All around us there is energy, dissatisfaction and frustration. But leftwing intellectuals are unable to do anything with it. They are incapable of being

leaders, they seem unable to direct this energy somewhere meaningful, to fill people with enthusiasm for their ideals, to initiate new kinds of political organisation…

D.V.: Perhaps it'll take a few more decades before we understand what tactics and strategies are necessary. Everything is happening very fast and it's difficult to predict future developments. But this is often the way things are. When you look back at history you find that the Bolsheviks, for instance, were far from prepared for revolution. They almost didn't participate in the February revolution.

N.O.: The question is whether art can still lead to emancipation or whether we are imprisoned in our own art and attempting as individuals or groups to find emancipation where none exists. Right now is a good time to ask ourselves this question, since a certain protest energy that you could still feel until recently is now on the wane. And intellectuals have also disappeared off the scene. Perhaps they made mistakes and didn't know what to say. This is the situation in Ukraine, which nobody knows how to resolve.

D.V.: I see things slightly differently. In the Middle Ages you had monks, who sat around in cloisters, researched manuscripts, corrected them, transcribed them, and translated Greek philosophy, while all around raged violence, cruelty and barbarity. However, the monks were isolated from all of this and devoted themselves to their work, which basically anticipated the modern age, which arrived centuries later. Without their works there'd be nothing. Humanity would be lost, the legacy of ancient culture and philosophy wouldn't have survived. It's difficult to imagine how we'd be living today. On the one hand, it's a very comfortable position, on the other it's very vulnerable. To be honest, I don't know what else to do at present. We've asked ourselves what the leftwing could do in Ukraine at present. We have many friends there, who are in the centre of certain intellectual and artistic affairs. But many of them no longer live there. One of our friends was on a study trip in Vienna when the situation began to escalate. So he travelled home, but soon returned to his studies. He felt that he couldn't influence anything. It reminds me of the situation around 1933 in Germany. Most intellectuals left because they felt there was nothing they could do under those circumstances.

Are you saying that we have to view current events from a longer historical perspective?

D.V.: Trying to understand what is genuinely happening is also part of the leftwing tradition. In what moment of history do we find ourselves? How long did it take the workers to form a politically aware class, the proletariat? In Great Britain and Russia it took centuries. It takes a while to get from illiteracy to reading Das Kapital. People talk of a creative class, the expansion of the production of knowledge… I believe that at present we are only in the first stage of the creation of a new class. I still believe that only something like a class can be a historical actor or the vehicle of more fundamental political change. If you look at all the recent demonstrations, from Istanbul to Egypt to Russia, these

were protests by this stratum of creative workers. The Muslim Brotherhood manages to communicate with both the rural and urban populations. It offers a certain moral compass, something which is important right now. The left doesn't know how to communicate with the masses. We're aware of this and in our art we deliberately aim for a certain type of populism. We try to arrive at a non-hermetic language and narrative aesthetic. We're not interested in preaching to the converted, operating within a closed circle, reading the same books, etc. I believe that a certain grey zone exists in the Czech Republic. You may not be speaking to the masses, you don't organise mass entertainment, which is also important. But at the same time you're not closed within a sect, you don't speak with only a few like-minded souls. For us the sphere of culture and art is a kind of grey zone. We have our channels through which we can contact people. A good number of people view our website. We are saying: look, there exists another aesthetic, there are other values, a different way of working.

You're well known for addressing the institutional structure of art. You have set rules as to how you will collaborate with institutions, and you're engaged in a fight for more ethical forms of institution. Why is this so important to you? In the end the question of cultural institutions is marginal and doesn't interest many people.

N.O.: This is the "factory" where we work, our working environment. Dmitrij is involved in the initiative Artleaks and I was one of the organisers of the May Congress of Creative Workers in Moscow. It's an opportunity to become aware of our position within the structure of cultural production. Should we dictate or at least influence the conditions of our artistic activities within the framework of this structure? Or do we let others dictate the conditions while we simply subordinate ourselves without raising any questions? Over the last twenty years you couldn't pose these questions in Russia. A cultural worker basically didn't exist and nobody publicly discussed their position in society. For some reason, at a certain moment in time people suddenly began to take an interest in their working conditions. For three years we organised a meeting at which it was possible to discuss and consider these matters. I don't think we failed so much as the energy moved into other spheres. We lack a certain level of solidarity. The core of the organisational team of the May Congress comprised about five genuinely active people, and yet there are thousands of creative workers in Moscow. We've not managed to create genuine art unions. It needs huge amounts of work and you may as well say goodbye to your own artistic activities. You have to deal with lawyers. This blocked us. It was at this time that the Occupy movement started. Suddenly it seemed more meaningful to devote your energies to this movement rather than plod on and on explaining why we're poor artists with no income.

D.V.: Since the 1970s there's been no seriously engaged artist without institutional criticism. It's not about everyone being so morally aware. It's more

that they know that the means of production are not only means but somehow present in the production itself. The gallery is not a neutral space; it contains money, politics and labour. This issue appears in a very limited circle of socially engaged projects. We're not purists – in this sense we're dissidents. We created a certain profile for ourselves, we can be part of controversial exhibitions, but we pay attention to what it's all about. I wrote about this in connection with Manifesta in St Petersburg. I explained why we had decided to participate in the show. It's not the exhibition of our dreams, but we have our own ambitions and our own mission. And then you find yourself in the field of practical politics. It's not about closing your eyes to what is going on. But I'm not responsible for how Manifesta is going to look. I'm responsible for our affairs. However, every such project involves power conflicts. Somebody might say that they used us for their own ends. However, the situation is not so simple, it's more ambiguous. We used their resources, while they received our symbolic capital. Only when we see the result of the cooperation will we see who won. At present, nobody knows. (In the end the group changed its decision and had to withdraw from the show at the Hermitage Museum in protest against the annexation of Crimea – ed.).

What's your opinion of the Tranzit network of art institutions?

In the case of Tranzit it's pretty clear. On the one hand, there's a bank in Vienna that wants to extend its influence into the countries of the former Eastern bloc. If you want to create a business empire, you need cultural capital. There's also the tradition of Austrian patronage, i.e. elites that genuinely love art and who feel a certain guilt. If you have money, you'll always feel guilty. What's more, Vienna is the city of Freud. People analyse their unconscious. They want to know why they're not feeling so great and then go and organise exhibitions of political art. That's what's going on in the case of Erste. Originally it was a cooperative bank, though that naturally changed. It's complex. Should we have demonstrated in front of Erste? The bankers would have been happy. But that doesn't interest us. At Erste everything seems pretty transparent as regards this type of event.

In recent art we are seeing more and more interest in the theme of art as work, the artist as a cultural worker, etc. Why is this suddenly popular? Why is it suddenly an issue?

D.V.: I'm more interested in why it's taken so long. It must be related to the massive quantity of culture being produced. In Berlin, London and New York there are huge numbers of artists who not only don't receive a fee, but don't even have the opportunity to ply their trade, exhibit, etc. They are beginning to perceive themselves as something we could call the proletariat. But this involves a lot of problems and questions. Nikolaj has already mentioned art trade unions, but I think the idea would be difficult to realise in practice. The character of artistic production

these days is getting closer and closer to business. So it's difficult.

So do you believe that artists might one day form some kind of new proletariat?

D.V.: Yes, I do. As Marx said, there exists a class in itself and class for itself. We're at the start of a long process of creating such consciousness, because up till now nobody has understood much about this. There has to be a transformation in perception from the bourgeois to the proletarian. Everything needs time. Aesthetic production is also a means of transforming and contributing to this perception. I'm cautiously optimistic. I've met many people in the West who are very downbeat about their situation. Budgets are being cut, etc. They are traumatised because they remember the seventies, when things were better. We know nothing like that. We see how the circle forming itself around us is growing slowly, how our friends have more and more power and cultural capital.

N.O.: In Russia there are also artists who are very active politically, even though this doesn't have to be linked to their art. Activism doesn't have to be art. Art can have a liberating effect without being linked directly to political activity. Sometimes I combine them. I do something in the street and then paint the same thing on a gallery wall, and vice versa. During indirect confrontation with the police it's not a bad thing to say that you're an artist, that this is art, and wriggle out of trouble that way. There's nothing wrong with that. It's important to consider what art is and what activism is and to combine them cleverly. We always have to ask: What values does this activity embody and on what level and within what timeframe? Art speaks to people who don't yet even exist. The work of art belongs to the future.

D.V.: Today's reality follows the logic of business, where the target group is always important. They're always asking you what your target group is. Even progressive art institutions are falling in line. But art doesn't speak to a target group. It speaks to everyone. Ok, maybe that sounds romantic. But it's an important difference.

Chto Delat? [*What is to be Done?*] (founded in 2003) is a collective of artists, critics, philosophers and writers, whose aim is to link up political theory, art and activism. The group's activities include art projects, seminars and public campaigns that might take the form of video films, theatre plays, radio programmes, posters and murals. The group publishes a newsletter of the same name in Russian and English. Last year it exhibited at the Bergen Triennial, the Former West Congress at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, and the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea.

Emancipation through Emotion
The Bureau of Melodramatic Research on the relationship between theory and practice

What first brought you together?
We've known each other for a very long time, we went to high-school together. We became friends before we went to art school - we were actually speaking about this recently: how this time spent together, this layer of the everyday events and discussions, the small talk and coffee gossip, has always been present in our practice. Later on, to a certain extent, our surroundings influenced our decision to work together. We were operating within quite a conservative environment and it was a form of support. But our cooperation was mainly based on our friendship.

Am I right in saying that you didn't study art but other disciplines?
We studied art, but not from the beginning, I first did cultural studies and Alina economics.

How would you describe the position of women on the Romanian art scene? And what role does feminism play in your work and your thinking?
There are many very interesting women artists in Romania, strong personalities, also most curators are women. Of course feminism is important for us. But we don't want to describe ourselves as a feminist group. Feminism has impacted considerably on our work, but it's not the main impulse. Several

of our projects contain no reference to feminism whatsoever.
Without feminism, we wouldn't be where we are and do what we do. Or maybe we would work in disguise, as Isabelle Eberhardt or Hypatia. But we feel the necessity to go beyond the restrictive term feminism. We are interested in many issues, in biology, geology, science, anthropology, literature, and for us it is more important to construct something rather than always find the gender-related problem. I guess we were more interested in Deleuze's concept of becoming-woman.
Affect for example, a topic we've been exploring extensively, is not explicitly a feminist issue but has very subtle ties to feminism underlying it. As discussed by Brian Massumi and others, it is not subjective, it does not belong to a subject and thus opens up a whole area of indeterminacy, of becoming-together, which is an essential stake for feminism. As is the question of the body, with which affect is closely linked.

What is surprising upon first seeing your performances is the exaggerated female self-stylisation. You are always so elegantly dressed, made up, etc...
That starts from our engagement with the genre of melodrama. In itself melodrama includes a certain aesthetics of gender. It is also very pop, it is low culture. Exaggerated femininity and camp are perceived as the opposite of intellectualism. This is by no means something new, but we are interested

in how to work with such conventions and then twist them. Especially in the Romanian context, the convention served for us as perfect camouflage, it allowed us to work closer to situationism – a movement we are very interested in. Gradually, we were less interested in the performance of gender alone and rather focused on playing around more complex fictions, related to the institution of the Bureau of Melodramatic Research in itself.
Maybe we can say that we started from the performance of gender and ending up in a performance of institutions, staged situations and fictions inserted in the public space and becoming real.

Melodrama may be a popular genre, but you often make reference to complex theories and use complicated concepts. How do you set about selecting the language of your performances?
We are interested in the contradictions and tensions inside the medium that we are using. We often dream about a formless form of an art work which becomes unrecognizable because of its internal antagonisms – between language and gesture, different registers of voice and vocabulary, semantic tensions. As for the complicated concepts, we work on the basis that a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down. We are using it differently here than it is normally employed, in the sense that these formats can maybe pre-digest some speculative or philosophical thoughts. We are trying to dislocate it from the academic contexts. But we are quite sure, and we have no problem with this, that some pretentious terms act

as mere noise, incomprehensible babble, language parasites that have the role to merely smudge speech registers.
Although we love reading philosophy and theory in general, we are also interested in resisting the temptation to subordinate our practice to it. "Doing" can often enrich thought incredibly. In "doing", one is more open to other logics than to that of the mind: the logic of the event or the logic of the body. So trusting a practice can even turn solid concepts upside down, a simple gesture can solve a difficult theorem or throw into crisis a whole formalist system. Gauss obtained the formula for the sum of the natural numbers only through a gesture of inversion and superposition. We often arrive at theory via performance because the latter is an open process that demands unknowing and nonknowledge. We are also interested in how a performance acts upon the body, the affects, and the relationship with the audience. How performance acts upon the mind.
We collect various concepts and languages which at first sight cannot be combined, so you have to create a space, a format, where they can influence each other. That might mean melodrama, a television cookery programme, a self-help manual, etc. This kind of context itself then operates on the ideas and these ideas reflect back on the format. For us this is a more interesting way of thinking through the relationship between performance and philosophy than one based on subordination (which is unfortunately quite common in research based practice nowadays: artists trying to illustrate ideas taken up from the

rock star philosophers of the moment). On the contrary, we see it as a mutual relationship, and what comes out of it shapes both of them retrospectively. Conflict is crucial for us. We work with the conflict between high and low, serious and banal, intimate and geopolitical, personal and geological. It is also important that the dynamics of antagonisms oftentimes slip out of control.

In your projects you try to show how capitalism (or indeed any other political regime) manipulates our emotions. In this sense emotions are the way we are enslaved by power. Might they not on the other hand possess a certain emancipatory potential?
We had long debates regarding what we would name the institution we were planning to set up. We knew that it would be devoted to melodrama, but what we realised quite early on is that it wasn't just another topic or subject of investigation. For us it was mainly a method of work. So we decided to call it The Bureau of Melodramatic Research rather than the Bureau of Research into the Melodramatic or anything like that; its a study which works by incorporation, the object of research is swallowed in and becomes a modus operandi. There is no clinical distance, it's not a lab in which emotions are dissected any more that we are dissected by them.
The ambiguity of what the quality "melodramatic" refers to in the title of our institution is quite important (if the research in itself is melodramatic or if it is only a research on melodrama). The methodology is inextricably linked to the subject of the investigation. A bit

like a lover trying to analyze the beloved – she/he ends up in poetry, which often is more thought-provoking than the most complex philosophy.
Brian Massumi elaborates at large in his writings on the emancipatory potential of affect. Our hypothesis, following the theory of affect and the new rationalist thought strand, is that humans could be hosts of this extraterrestrial parasite called affect which has to be helped to emancipate at the cost of humanity – and of course reason is not excluded from this, since there is a mind of the affect, just that it is a twisted mind, one that accepts the excluded middle and defies the principle of noncontradiction.
It has a lot to do with this impossibility of a sanitized lab, in which the scientist is safely separated from her research. There are feminist theories coming from the philosophy of science which propose a relational ontology based on this interdependence between the scientist and the object of research, a process in which both are changing. Karen Barad call this process intra-action, which is different from inter-action in that the entities that participate are produced in the course of this participation, blowing up any laws of causality that we might expect. In the same way, the melodramatic researcher is entangled in a process which re-creates the very origin of his or her entanglement. There is no way you can stay outside, and that's precisely what affective emancipation is all about. There is no security of a secure position, and no predetermined knowledge.
You can't set objectives. You can't say: right, now I'm going to come up with something emancipatory. You create something (that you in yourself are part of) and then set it free - the "doing" has its own agency, what will happen next is out of your control. You can try to predict, but the logic of events defies probability. That is also the logic of emotions, they follow their own mind.

What do you think is the emotion that most supports the survival of the current system?

Fear?
And love.
Both of them together. LoveFear.
However, I doubt that one can point at a particular emotion, but rather at the relationship between two twin-centers, at their double radiance, always interfering, being superimposed upon each other, even frontally colliding. This strange physics of affect makes up the unpredictable modulations of melodrama. To pass from ontology to politics, there was one recent interesting example of a political intervention in the LoveFear affect machine. Last year there were mass protests in Romania against the cyanide gold mining in the Roșia Montană region. Around the same time, there was a strange accident, a little boy was allegedly bitten to death by stray dogs in a park. Of course, this was the version of the story that the local media broadcasted. People believed it, there was an atmosphere of panic, dogs started being stared at with fearful eyes, the poor animals were cast in the role of the unknown canine-enemy. Consequently, the government decided to euthanize all stray dogs, a drastic course of action, solely

justified by the general fear that was actually being purposefully generated in order to move attention away from the gold mining scandal. This was an instance where power had instantiated itself by modulating affect to produce a mass imperative to “love gold and fear dogs”. It required a personal story, mediated and amplified to make power act through people themselves (soft power). The whole case proved to be quite the inverse: the dogs that killed the child were actually trained dogs who had an owner, not stray dogs. Yet a fiction that had been treated as real is as real as the real itself (doing necessitates treating something as real). Feelings couldn’t be unfelt, the truth proved to be less real than the fiction. Around that time, the Bureau of Melodramatic Research was spreading the slogan, reversing the affective vectors into “Love dogs and fear gold”. In the end, the protests were progressively silenced, people were quite tired so there was less support than needed for the dogs but fortunately the euthanasia-law didn’t pass. Though today less and less dogs can be seen on the streets, it seems that the action took course in a different way, hidden from media and public opinion.

You also examine questions related to work. You examine precarious working conditions, the de-materialised character of work, etc. What is the role of the artist in relation to this issue?

The topic of the immaterial character of contemporary work has long featured in our works. But we don’t simply put material and immaterial work up against each other, the relationship between them isn’t that simple.

Actually, we are beginning to have a problem with the concept of immaterial work. It was a useful concept in that it made clear the difference between these two categories of work. But if you think about what intellectual or affective or emotional work actually is, you realise that it is far from being immaterial.

Work is more and more about performance. A performance that someone puts on. All workers are more and more subjected to the same conditions as the self-employed artist. It would seem as if the artist were the new exponent of the exploited subject and perhaps the new future proletariat. But it is not like this, of course, things are way more complex. It is also presently assumed that the artist is the only subject supposed to react to politically sensitive situations. I am referring for instance to the call to boycott the exhibitions part of the St. Petersburg Manifesta. Instead of this, we should be thinking about what abilities and knowhow the artists possess that could help intervene politically – not only to criticize but also to construct a different world-story, one that could become strong and active only by treating it real, that could twist subjectivities and the one-world of capitalism’s monolithic “everything is possible”.

Would you call yourselves art-activists?

We don’t like this kind of pigeonhole. What does it mean to be passive and active?

It's linked with emotions. Passion and passivity share the same etymology. If you think about emotions and affects, passivity is present in them. Something or someone has an effect on you and you don't have things under control. In the leftwing tradition there is an important line of thought that emphasises activity, rationality and control. You initiate an event and you have a clear objective. We don't agree with the idea that a human being is a rational being, that his or her emotions are played out within, and that there is a clear barrier between the inner and outer life. We're more interested in the permeability of these boundaries. You can provoke certain emotions, but you can also be obsessed and controlled by them, as though they were some kind of strange, anonymous force. Does activism arise simply from activity? Karen Barad writes about quantum physics, not about gender issues. Therefore she is often criticized for not being more explicit, and is often asked: "What's quantum physics got to do with feminism?" Her answer is: "Everything".

So you believe that intellectual activities represent engagements in themselves?

I'd call what we're doing a thought experiment with an open end and no beginning. And I'd like to be able to crack the end open, as if moving through a wall that blocks the road. To find a way to pierce through dead ends one needs to alienate oneself from one's acquired perspective, one should allow completely different mental paradigms to take over and then superimpose them, a bit like looking from as many sides as possible, all at once. Intellectual activities should be engagements with the impossible, engagements with their own limits. That is when a melodramatic jump out of oneself becomes intellectual and an intellectual leap is absolutely melodramatic.
The relationship between the levels of theory, thinking, intellectual activity and practice is very complicated and it is difficult to find some simple causality between them.

Is the artist closer to theory or practice?

It's difficult to say. I don't know whether you can separate things in that way. Someone might act and create in a completely non-theoretical way and yet impact on a theory, and vice versa.

Do you make a distinction between your work in Romania and abroad? Is it different in some way?

Yes, our work was always context-related. In Romania, for instance, we often organise workshops and lectures. We issue invitations to guests coming from various fields and we operate as initiators of intellectual debate. It wouldn't happen that way elsewhere. We are not interested in speaking about the context which we come from. We react to the context in which we find ourselves. And then there's a certain framework within which we work, often regardless of where we are. The interest in emotions, for instance. There is also a global urgency that devoids the context of itself – as is the case of the ecological crisis and imminent extinction.

What is your attitude to the institutions where you exhibit? Are you tempted to intervene in the way they operate? Is there an institution in which you would refuse to exhibit your work? Why do you exhibit in galleries?

We don't believe in the illusion of some kind of exterior, a clean place outside any institution where you remain unsullied. For a while we did. We wanted to perform outside galleries and intervene directly. The Bureau was created for this purpose. Bucharest didn't even have many galleries full stop, so we created our own context. Wherever we had already exhibited, we then tried to eclipse that institution with our own. We wanted to have an institution that is constantly relocating, an institution that occupies different spaces but remains one and the same – maybe not quite the same.

But this issue of institutions is a little bit like the issue of feminism. We don't want to be "institutional critique artists" in the same way we don't want to be "feminist artists". We want to have the freedom to address these issues if we want to, but also to not address them if we feel other issues are more relevant. There's an endless debate going on about which institutions to cooperate with and which not.

Yeah, corporate museums are always criticized more, as though an institution financed by the state was automatically ok, as though it were possible to draw a dividing line between these two worlds. But when you exhibit in an institution that has the same problems as any other, you should be allowed not to address institutional questions without being labelled as non-political straight away. If the institution is attempting to create a space in which a certain knowledge and critical stance can be developed, then it's a good thing to use this space and participate in this endeavour in some way. We have dealt with institutional criticism a lot and after a while it becomes intolerable, it's simply art gazing at its own navel. It is important to react when it's necessary, but it is also important to have the option not to react.

In Bucharest people maybe see us as artists who are criticising institutional operations, because within the local context we've often engaged on this level. But we're interested in lots of other phenomena and it is important to have space available for developing different types of practice. You can't simply exhibit on the street all the time. We don't only collaborate with galleries, but also with universities and publishing houses, we are very interested in the educational system and publications as other types of public space. However, we do respect certain rules. For instance, we always ask for a fee for an exhibition or event.

Yeah, that's important, not only for us, but for other artists who exhibit after us. It obviously applies to institutions that operate with a budget, not independent projects.

What is the relationship between contemporary art and the general public in Romania?

There's a chasm separating them.

Also, the media in Romania is very conservative, and the same applies to other institutions that should be mediating art. What's more, a lot of these institutions

are disappearing because of the neoliberal government and its cuts. People don't even get to hear about things that are taking place before they are gone. There are no educational programmes in museums, etc.

Is there a professional organisation in Romania that represents artists?

Yes, but it's very conservative and closed. None of the young artists working in non-traditional media belong to it.

Have you thought about establishing such an organisation?

Yeah, we've talked about it a lot, establishing a new one or trying to enter the existing one. But it would have to be a group initiative, otherwise it makes no sense.

The Bureau of Melodramatic Research is an institution founded in Bucharest in 2009 by Irina Gheorghe and Alina Popa. It aims to investigate melodrama in various different social, political and economic contexts. The outputs of this research are then provided to the general public in the form of exhibitions, publications, performances and lectures. The Bureau has been active in many exhibition institutions around Europe, e.g. the Centre for Contemporary Art Castle Ujazdowski in Warsaw, the Museum of Modern Art (MUMOK) in Vienna, the BAK Gallery Utrecht and the Školská Gallery in Prague.