

IETM REPORT

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ART & ACTIVISM

Report from the IETM Rijeka Plenary Meeting, 24-27 October 2019

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Art & activism

The moderator divided the session into two parts – an introduction of the speakers and the presentation of their experience with the topic, followed by a set of examples that were intended to energise and inform the discussion around the intersection between art and activism. Since one of the upcoming meetings of the IETM community in Tromsø (30 April - 3 May 2020) will focus on this subject specifically, it was also an exercise in trying to identify some of the key aspects and challenges to be further explored in IETM Tromsø.

Igor Stokfiszewski was invited to moderate the session due to his experience working at the Krytyka Polityczna magazine, which combines art and activism in successful and diverse ways.

The starting point of the talk was how the political impetus of the arts has recently slowed down, and how this tendency is expressed through the political choices of voters across Europe. The lack of impact might stem from the fact that methodologies and forms currently used by contemporary art activism are outdated and inefficient.

Speaker

Andrej Mirčev, UAOS - Academy of Arts, Croatia

Moderator

Igor Stokfiszewski, Krytyka Polityczna // Political critique, Poland

Igor presented and compared various examples of artistic work from former Yugoslavia, Poland and other parts of Europe, which have the potential for political engagement and, if used properly, could increase the political effectiveness of artistic action.

The first suggestion relates to the socio-political self-instrumentalisation of art and the re-activation of party member-artists, who are associated with the thinking that propaganda is a function of art.

One such example is the work of the Poland-based, Slovak artist Tomáš Rafa, from 2009. The artist recorded new forms of nationalism in the Czech Republic, Poland and Ukraine, among others, showing the

demonstrations of the far right, their clashes with police, and attacks on Roma communities and antifa social centres. His work conveys insight into the stages of the process of shaping nationalist tendencies in the region and informs left-wing activists of current developments. It can therefore be compared to the work of a citizen journalist. Thanks to the artist's wide network on YouTube, his art is viewed by hundreds of thousands and sometimes over a million people.

Tomáš Rafa's art is an example of artistic practice that emphasises the socio-political effectiveness of the transformation of reality, counteracting authoritarian and fascist tendencies. His work has clear political goals, reaching beyond the field of art. He self-instrumentalises his own artistic practice in the service of left-wing social movements.

Another example of such an approach is the work of Mosireen Collective, which creates suggestive video art in the service of the Egyptian revolution, contributing to a change in the views of international bodies on the actions of the Hosni Mubarak regime and its final abandonment by existing allies.

A different kind of practice is represented by Jonas Staal, whose work embodies the socio-political self-instrumentalisation of art. Jonas Staal is a Dutch artist who is known for his involvement in the social movements arising from the 2011 protests: the Occupy Movement, Spanish Indignados, the movement for



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the autonomy of Rojava. On 9 September 2017, he performed at an event organised by DiEM25 (Democracy in Europe Movement) – a political movement founded by former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis – at the Bozar Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels. DiEM25 was established as a pan-European political movement with electoral ambitions. Its representatives have recently won seats in the Hellenic Parliament on behalf of the MeRA25 party – the Greek electoral wing of DiEM25.

During his speech in Brussels, Staal said: "I'm an artist, I'm a member of DiEM25. Here gathered at Bozar we represent an alternative but only if every single one of us puts our hearts and our passion and our craft and our imagination in this movement, only if we become members and representatives and activists can we take back our imagination. We have the plans and we have people to do it. I'm here to say that now you have the artists too."

Staal not only declared his commitment to the political movement – the space for this event was also arranged by his team, so he gave the movement his political passion and craftsmanship. As a member of DiEM25, Staal renews the figure of "the party-member artist" to refer to Oliver Marchart's term, and reactivates the idea of a propaganda artist working for the benefit of a political movement. Staal has just published a manifesto, Propaganda Art in the 21st Century, which begins with the following confession: "My name is Jonas Staal and I am a propaganda artist."

A second proposition is the concept of "artivism" developed by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera – the art of creating platforms for political expression intended for those who have no voice.

Bruguera – founder of the Hannah Arendt International Institute of Artivism – defines the creative practice that she develops as "giving space for self-expression to people who want to send a message to those in power." In the case of artivism, art undergoes self-instrumentalisation for the benefit of communities and disadvantaged

groups, while the artist takes the role of the facilitator of the emancipatory political process. Such an artistic approach contributes to the renewal of community art.

Another example is Polish artist Jaśmina Wójcik, who treats her practice not only as providing citizens with a space for self-expression but also as providing the community with the tools for direct political action.

Another artist who is engaged in an activist-like practice is the laureate of the European Cultural Foundation award, the Germany-based Belarusian artist Marina Naprushkina, who opened an autonomous New Neighborhood centre in Berlin which serves refugees as a platform for their social and political self-organisation.

To increase the social impact of art, it is necessary to understand the difference between art using participatory tools and participation as a new paradigm of art, as the very starting point for artistic creation. One of large scale works Igor created together with Jaśmina Wójcik was a feature-length creative documentary film entitled "Symphony of the Ursus Factory", made with the participation of former workers at the tractor factory in Ursus. From the perspective of the "traditional" approach to art, the work would be regarded as a film made using participatory tools. From the creators' point of view, however, it was a participatory action using film tools. Participatory art in the new understanding refers to artistic result-based art as direct democracy to representation-based democracy. These are two different paradigms.

The final proposition refers to activism within the field of art, to the workers' movement in culture, the movement for the democratisation of cultural institutions and cultural organisations, or more broadly – to the movement for the right to culture.

The contribution of art to the struggles for democracy, equality and freedom has a chance of success only if the field of art itself is characterised by democracy, equality and freedom.

The past decade has been a time of a new type of institutional critique that has combined the conceptual approach to the idea of a cultural institution with activist tools of social impact. Examples include the American Occupy Museums movement, Teatro Valle Occupato experiments in Rome or ex-Asilo Filingeri in Naples, artists' trade unions in Poland, experimentation with the democratisation of institutions in Croatia and finally, a movement for the feminisation of cultural institutions in Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany and The Netherlands. They all utilise the activist temperament of people involved in culture for the fight for higher wages in the field of arts and culture, greater transparency of the machinery of art, raising the level of participation of artists, culture-makers and audiences in decision-making processes regarding culture, and for artists, culture-makers and audiences to take control of the means of cultural production.

According to Igor, all of the above-mentioned tendencies in politically engaged, contemporary art are united by one thing: the consistent disappearance of the man-artist as a figure of an individual demiurge and the parallel emergence of the woman-artist as a figure of the collective facilitator of political emancipation processes that take place within communities, institutions and societies, using the tools of feminised culture.

Of paramount importance to contemporary art nowadays is the fight against racism, which is crucial for the coming social struggles. Social movements researcher Cristina Flesher Fominaya noted that the current cycle of social struggles that began with the birth of the Global Justice Movement popularly known as alter-globalist movement has now progressed through two phases: the anti-capitalist phase, which reached its apogee in Seattle and Genoa, and contributed to the formulation of theses and practices about the need to develop economic alternatives in relation to capitalism; and through the anti-parliamentary phase, which reached its apogee in the squares of Spain and Greece, and contributed to the formulation of theses and practices on the need

to develop a political alternative in relation to representative democracy.

The refugee crisis launched a third phase, which has a close relationship with culture. It has awakened racism lurking in the identity of postcolonial Europe, which in its institutional form became a structural racism, a combination of prejudice and institutional power over the future of non-white individuals and groups. Only culture with its power to integrate otherness into the spectrum of the collective imagination is able to oppose this process. Igor finished his presentation by saying: "I believe that it is our duty to imagine, and then to help others to imagine, Europe inhabited only by coloured people, the black Europe, which is coming and to which we should be looking forward."

Andrej Mircev, UAOS - Academy of Arts Associate Professor who was Igor's guest at the panel, likewise attempted to change the perspective, by referring to the renewal of the right-wing ideological spectrum that has been taking place in Rijeka and the region in which it is located, over the past 30 years. Just around the time when he received the invitation to take part in this panel, he was watching a TV news report about Italian neofascist groups that came to Rijeka with their flags to celebrate 100 years of D'Annunzio's seizing of Rijeka and turning it into a battleground where nationalism was for the first time rehearsed and embodied in public space.

It was an example of a very site-specific participation activism and political instrumentalisation of art. Afterwards, he gave the example of Tomasso Marinetti's work, the futurist artist who was also active in Rijeka at the beginning of the 20th century. Marinetti's manifesto was presented at the performance studies as an example of a tool for activating audiences – to break the barrier between the stage and the viewers, the creators would come up with irritating experiences that would then instill fights and unease. Yet Marinetti was also known for his association with fascism and for being friends with Mussolini – showing how activism and art can be seen not from a left-wing position, but as a right-wing instrument.



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Andrej's reflection on the topic of audience development concentrated on the audience becoming an activist, and he presented several examples. One of them is the dissatisfied audience that does not agree with the political message of a given work and tries to interrupt it.

For example, 30 years ago, in 1990, Sveti Sava was shown in Belgrade. It was one of the last Yugoslav theatre pieces and was directed by the Macedonian Vladimir Milan with a Bosnian ensemble and with a leading actor from Serbia who was born in Montenegro. The play talked about the historical figure St. Sava, the archbishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church and founding father of Serbian orthodox spirituality, but it made his leading character a gay priest, which was a repellent combination at the time in certain circles in Serbia. After its premiere in Novi Sad, the play came to Belgrade, preceded by protests by right-wing groups – some of these protesters were to go on trial in The Hague after the war. These religious militants managed to stop the show, and the actor who played the main role had to be guarded by policemen as threats had been made on his life. Eventually, in self-defence, due to some mistake, he shot a person and ended up in prison, where he wrote a memoir and recalled that particular premiere, concluding with the sentence: "For me that was really the night when Yugoslavia fell apart; it was clear we will have a war". For Andrej

Mircev, this was an example of how the cultural sphere reacts to political issues and traumas and helps to navigate the political context and to foresee the future.

The second example was more contemporary, and also took place in Belgrade, in 2017, when conflicts between Serbians and Albanians broke out. Albanian artists were then invited to Serbia to present their work in this context, and again had to be guarded by police. The work, a short 10-minute choreography, was centred around the raping of Albanian women by Serbian police (while the Serbian police was now protecting the Albanians). Again, right-wing nationalist members stormed the performance and tried to stop it by singing loud patriotic songs, while the audience stood up and clapped loudly to defend the artwork, allowing it to finish.

Similarly, Our Violence and Your Violence by Oliver Frlić, which included an actress giving birth to a Croatian flag and Jesus Christ raping a Muslim woman, irritated some catholic militants who came to interrupt the play. Again, the audience defended the continuation of the piece by singing childlike songs, ensuring the autonomy of art.

The final reference was Dawid Wojnarowicz's exhibition in Boston in 2010, which included his controversial work Fire in My Belly, which criticised the

heteronormative family and nationalism it produces, using a sculpture of Jesus Christ with ants crawling on it. When he was alive, the artist was sued by the American Association of Families because of this work, but he won the case. After his death, the organisation still demanded censorship and wanted the work to be taken down, inspiring protests by the defenders of art and its practice and exemplifying an interesting dissensus of right- and left-wing activists.

In closing, Andrej Mircev pointed to the need to connect struggles and perspectives and to combine identity politics with economic justice and class struggle.

In the discussion that followed the speakers' presentations, the floor was first taken by Tessa Gordziejko from the UK, a party member and an artist who was struck by the fact that the discourse inside and outside of IETM lacks an emphasis on climate activism and climate change. Her work as an artist focuses on ecology and the coming crisis, and she found it strange to be raising any other issues currently, since climate justice will soon be the major driver of global justice. She raised the need for emotional responses and ways to inspire action, but also to give people a way to grieve or think about future generations, as well as alternative forms of activism and artistic work that includes many voices, not an individual story. In her opinion, the collective voices are part of the climate change aesthetics, just as the art in response to these challenges needs to be communal.

Andrej Mircev referred to the work of the artist Joseph Beuys, who also co-founded the Green Party, which is on the rise in many European countries. This tendency brings hope to progressive voters, yet at the same time in his hometown, Osijek, the Green Party is in a ruling alliance with right-wing parties.

Natalia Skoczyłas, the author of this report, mentioned the traditional relations between fascist and nationalist movements and ecology, and pointed to the rise of communities across Europe that protect

the environment and share a racist, xenophobic ideology. Another issue she raised was the fact that some of the artforms mentioned in the prelude are outdated and dysfunctional in practice, especially after seeing one of Jonas Staal's works, "Transunions", at the Warsaw Biennale, where the seemingly adventurous format could not hold the complexity of the issues it tried to contain.

Akeim Buck emphasised how people of colour around the world have been experiencing the effects of climate change for a while now, and how they leave their homelands because of the destruction of their ecosystems. It is necessary to understand how white supremacy and fascism allow for the obsession with capitalism and classism. People seem to wake up to the fact that the planet is dying and see how these ideologies allowed for that to happen. Nevertheless, the use of white privilege, however problematic it seems to the middle classes, can in this context be seen as a tool for change. For him, the key problem is the fact that people are dispossessed, uprooted from their land, deprived of any ownership and fed with ideologies that make them fight for the wrong things. There is a need for more indigenous technologies and sciences, as well as more conversations on a deeply human level, regardless of what divides us.

Sarah Hopfinger from Scotland, the UK, has been involved in Extinction Rebellion recently, where she experienced one of the most powerful manifestations of art during the interfaith evening on Trafalgar Square. Seeing people meditate made her realise the potential of what artistic processes can achieve, much more than protests, and how such performances affect the audience.

Igor Stokfiszewski mentioned the role of the Clown Army, a centralised formation of clowns that plays a particular role in demonstrations – they decrease tension between police and demonstrators through a ritualistic process in which members of society dig into the dynamics of the community and strengthen it even further. Similarly, activism needs structure to

achieve goals, and it also needs moments of digging into another kind of experience in order to strengthen itself.

Another participant from the UK was rather alarmed by the presence of propaganda in the talk, especially in the context of the manipulation that occurs in Europe during election cycles, where undecided groups are targeted by specialised companies at the service of nationalist politics.

Tomasso Franchin who is from the divided Italian city of Gorizia, presented an example of an association that organised an antifascist event on the 25th of July to commemorate the war, and borrowed extra chairs from the local fascist association, showing that in some cases, a collaboration, however awkward and unimaginable, is actually possible.

On a final note, I would like to quote Igor again, who said with strong conviction: "Don't think community art and participation is finished, participation is not finished, we have not even started." His words exemplified the great hope he has in these forms of (political) expression, as long as we continue to reinvent and reshape them. There is a sense that a lot of what has been achieved by the "Square generation" – by those who took part in the protests in public spaces after the 2008 financial crisis – turned out to be effective only to some extent. The art and the politics need constant, new imagination and new forms of action to fully explore their transformative potential – and we will see things change for the better as a result.