

Debat C: Be Creative! Be free! Be... an Artist! (...or shut up!)

The Artist as a Role Model in Neo-Liberal Societies

May 17th 2008 – 10.30-12.30

Moderator: Zvonimir Dobrovic (Domino / Queer Zagreb - www.queerzagreb.org)

Panelists: Marko Stamenkovic (KIOSK - www.kioskngo.org) , Vuc Cosic (Artist), Andre Nayer (Centre de Recherche et Prospective en droit social (CeRP) , Janez Jansa (Aksioma - www.aksioma.org)

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The meeting began exuberantly, with a suggested amendment to the title of this panel discussion- Be creative! Be free! Be an artist! ...or SHUT UP! This addition was in response to the new trend of championing the qualities and merits of being an artist, without actually experiencing the reality of the struggle to live an artistic life within the constraints of a Neo-liberalistic society- the main subject of the discussion.

The panel consisted of two theorists, and two artists; an important combination, it was noted, to allow for the drawing from both the fields of theory and experience during the discussion. A theorist cannot get a complete understanding of the artist's role without experiencing it, yet an artist may not be able to get an accurate view of his/her position within society, and attempting to do so can sometimes be a distraction or hindrance to the creative process. Our discussion on that day was not only an artistic one, but a social, political, and anthropological one as well.

Regardless of profession, we are all a part of a Neo-Liberal system. Neo-liberalism is a doctrine that market exchange is an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action. It suggests that freedom of economic exchange and development can secure personal and political liberty. Neo-liberalism includes policies which decrease governmental regulation and financing of social services (such as the arts, among many others), support privatization of enterprise, and encourage individual success over responsibility to the community.

So what does this anti community-based and hyper capitalistic trend mean for the artist? It was suggested that the development of this system is currently in quick evolution before our very eyes, and in order to maintain a healthy position for art, we must not ignore that it exists, but examine ourselves within it. We must either keep up, or slow it down, considering, as several panelists and members proposed:

- How do we, as artists, define ourselves within this system?
- How would we like to be defined within it?
- How can we create a respected and valued field for artists?
- How can we use our work to be subversive?
- To what extent should we speak out directly against the system?
- To what extent should we use self control?
- Can we create pressure from within?
- Who is it good to connect to?
- What choices do we actually have?

However, there are such a wide range of artists that the "artist's role" cannot actually finally be defined. The definition of "art" itself is always changing (and is inherently subjective), therefore making it quite difficult to discuss how the people who make it and work within its sphere relate to the people who don't. Who's to say if someone is making art, or just wasting time? Who's to say if the development of a new housing structure is industry or artistry?

A story was shared by one of the panelists about an Amsterdam-based artist whose work was simply to "meet people". This man sat in a café every day, holding appointments with people who wanted to sample his product- in this case, his company and his time. This story raised questions about productivity vs. unproductivity, or unproductivity AS productivity.

- What does it mean to be productive, as an artist?
- How does that definition differ from other professions?
- Is physical evidence of a work necessary to give it worth?

The question of worth in art is an ongoing and unsolvable debate. Yet all systems in our neo-liberal society are in some way based on one all important valuing factor: money. Capitalism moves at a fast pace to keep people from thinking. It attempts to redefine our ideas of what we want, what we value, and effectively who we are, in order to perpetuate the system. Therefore, the presence of money shifts our perception of value, and the merit of someone's work. The following issues were raised:

- On what basis, how much, and by whom should the artist be paid?
- Should the artist insist on being reimbursed for their contributions to society just as any other profession which directly benefits the lives of the whole, such as a teacher or a doctor?
- Does the knowledge of how much an artist is paid influence the new audience member's opinion of it?
- Is there (or why is there) a sense of shame for the artist who "sells out" and creates work specifically for financial gain?
- If the amount of money one is paid for art is not directly correlated to it's actual worth, then why are previous contracts such an important factor in the decision making of potential buyers?
- Why is it that very often, the people who manage and curate the art get paid, while the artists themselves don't?

Questions such as these brought up a multitude of heated responses, including, "Capitalism is dangerous."

-The exchange of money influences and mars our social standards and behaviors as well as our artistic developments

"We must be subversive from the inside"

-The artist (and non-artist) should be strong enough to dare to do what he/she wants, regardless of how the system rewards or punishes.

"We must slow the system, so that we can define ourselves within it"

-The artist's role as communicator and instigator of change must be protected.

"Shit, I love money"

-Money provides the standard of living that we all enjoy. You can't declare a war on money, any more than you can on geography or time- these are simply the elements of the world that we live in, and must be accepted and even respected, in order to use them to our best advantage.

Liberalism asks us to be free, to be autonomous. We have the "right of self-fulfillment", the right to develop our own capacity. Perhaps one of the gifts of being an artist is that you can choose, to some extent, how you exist within the system; on the institutional level, as a salary worker, or an independent contractor.

The system exists and will continue to develop with or without us. But being able to shift and move within it, may give us some power, or advantages over other professions which take the straight and narrow route laid out for them by the system. It is suggested that this skill to find creative solutions and roles, to essentially manage a microcosm is for everyone, not only artists.

More and more, supposedly artistic qualities are being sought after by potential employers of all industries. "Creative", "Passionate", "Inventive", and "Dedicated" are buzzwords for a new generation of employers. Many look for the "Engenuitous, creative problem solver" over someone with 25 years in the profession. Because the socio-economic system is in flux, it is itself being molded day by day, it seems to reward those who stand out, or create their own opportunity. Artists are being turned to as a model for this inventive chameleon capability.

Yet of course it is only the glamorized view of the artist which is being presented, and most people who tout the merits of artistic qualities actually have no experience in living the artist's life. Being an artist has always been romanticized by the rest of society in a distant way. The image of the bohemian in his humble abode, creating meaningful work out of nothing, is still very much alive. But with artistic qualities suddenly being valued by other sections of industry and society, how is that shifting our definition of "artist"? Is anyone who creates something new (such as an engineer) an artist? Where then does that leave those who create art which is not also necessarily a product, when monetary value is becoming such a defining factor of merit? How can we as artists keep up, when our identity is possibly being lessened by being copied? How can we define a solid place for ourselves in this rapidly evolving new system, which simultaneously rewards artistic qualities, and punishes artistic lifestyle? Or how can we just make our work, be true to our ideals, and support each other in our struggles without overanalyzing and pragmatizing? How can we just shut up?