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Ute Müller-Tischler

Curating and Management in Public Institutions



Against the backdrop of a current change of generations in the management and leadership positions of museums and cultural institutions in Berlin, the Office of Continuing Education and Culture has taken on the task to train young academics.

In our two-year practical training programme Curating and Management in Public Institutions (C A M P I), graduates of Master's programmes can pursue a professional career in the public cultural sector. The programme provides postgraduate-level training in curating in public exhibition spaces, regional history museums, urban culture and art in urban spaces, communication and education, public administration and management, as well as offering monthly compensation to participants. CURARE is an integral part of this programme and focuses on the curatorial element of the syllabus.

Under the guidance of mentors in the relevant fields, the fellows are introduced to current discourses and various methodologies of curating contemporary art and historical topics as well as to management and fundraising tools, audience development, art education and communication.

During this two-year training programme, the fellows participate in the artistic management and curation of the Bärenzwinger exhibition space (English: Bear Pit; the facility housed bears, Berlin's heraldic animal, from 1939 to 2015) in the centre of Berlin. They develop their own exhibition projects, they are in charge of artistic collaborations and communication, they experiment with the space and accompany the conservation of an important architectural monument and site in Berlin. While working together, the participants become acquainted with ethical and social aspects of their curatorial practice and are able to test new discourse formats. Above all, they are given the opportunity to directly experience the resonance and impact of their ideas



and working methods through the process of their own curatorial projects.

To facilitate this experimental practice, we launched the CURARE Curatorial Studies programme in 20202, which fellows can take part in free of charge, organised and led by Solvej Helweg Ovesen (artistic director of Galerie Wedding — Space for Contemporary Art and XO Curatorial Projects in Berlin) and carried out together with scientific assistant Ioli Tzanetaki (curatorial department at ΕΜΣΤ National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens). CURARE is based on the idea of creating sustainable access to existing curatorial knowledge in the city. It is a practice-oriented course fostering the development of curatorial profiles, artist and institution networks through thematic, behind-the-scenes visits to key institutions, with the participation of practitioners from the international and local art scenes. The course has a strong focus on the urban space as well as alternative curatorial thinking as opposed to the current cultural industry's conventions.

For their conversation series, Ovesen and Tzanetaki invited notable personalities such as Krist Gruijthuisen, director of KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, designated director of Haus der Kulturen der Welt, the collective ruan-grupa, artistic directors of documenta 15, Agustín Pérez Rubio, curator of the 11th Berlin Biennale as well as the curators Övül Ö. Durmuşoğlu and Joanna Warsza. The pages were designed by Form und Konzept, the graphic recordings created by Anna Lehmann, who kindly provided the graphic recording of the first two semesters.

I would like to thank all the contributors for their interest and commitment to the CURARE series. Without these important positions in current international exhibition practice, CURARE would not have been possible in this form. I would especially like to thank Solvej Helweg Ovesen and Ioli Tzanetaki, whose inspiring ideas and professional organisation were a blessing for all of us.

Ute Müller-Tischler

Solvej Helweg Ovesen

Imperfect Machines: Amplifying Threads and Creating Shifts

The Curare Reader comprises current influential curatorial practices in the field of contemporary art from a hands-on perspective. Through transcribed lectures and interviews with acknowledged curators, the Reader covers various practices of sustainable curating, exhibition making as a form of storytelling and proposes new post-pandemic curatorial formats, spaces, milieus and archives. Next to collective, parasitic and post-colonial forms of curating, it also allows for a glimpse inside processes of institution building and shaping. Topics such as the curation of art projects based on artistic research and the curatorial voice are equally touched upon.

This Reader has been launched in congruence with CURARE Curatorial Studies, a course that has been running in Berlin since 2020 and which is designed for younger curators working in communal galleries in central Berlin.



Aside from its primary focus, the CURARE Reader may be of relevance to anyone interested in developing their own curatorial position and entrepreneurial practice, who is curious about key curatorial ideas of our time, which are locally applicable as well as non-eurocentric.

The CURARE Curatorial Studies course was incepted by the Head of the Cultural Department of the District Office in Central Berlin, Ute Müller-Tischler, in conjunction with CURARE's scientific assistant Ioli Tzanetaki and myself, the undersigned, as artistic director. The course takes a hands-on, professional and entrepreneurial curatorial approach, grounding its pedagogy on dialogue and exchange. The collaboration with Tzanetaki, who has now become the head of the curatorial department at EMΣT National Museum of Contemporary Art, the largest contemporary art institution in Athens, has been instrumental in raising political awareness and reflection in regards to contents and production of artworks as well as curatorial methods and concepts. The Reader is greatly informed by CURARE Curatorial Studies' focus on working as a curator for the City of Berlin, within Berlin's central district. It references the local art scene, its history and development thanks to the many international curators who are based in the city and who contribute to the large diversity of exhibitions and an overall international atmosphere.



The Reader contains edited transcripts of lectures given during the course and very frank and openhearted interviews that had been co-conducted by the Curare participants (the participants are all mentioned by name in the legal notice and figure in the interviews as "Curare participant"). The contributions to the reader are on Sustainable and Deep Curating, a practice-based step-by-step guide written by the undersigned, Bonventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung on Savvy Contemporary and Sonsbeek 2020-24, ruangrupa on documenta 15 (Ade Damawan, Iswanto Hartono), Krist Gruijthuisen on "tackling" and shaping KW in Berlin as an institution, Raqs Media Collective (Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Jeebesh Bagchi) on practising collectivity and the intra-curatorial Ω, Övül Ö. and Joanna Warsza on "Die Balkone" (German: "the balconies") and DIY curating, Agustín Pérez Rubio on postcolonial curating and the 11th Berlin Biennale, Christina Landbrecht on the meaning of artistic research and the curating of art and knowledge production processes.



In a political climate where global shifts and imbalances have become tangible, where the COVID-19 pandemic still greatly affects the local and global art scenes, where the scarcity of natural resources starts being a non-negotiable issue also in the field of curating, new curatorial formats, spaces and measures of care and collectivity are urgently needed. The Curare Reader is a response to these needs and endeavours to foster adequate practices - be they within or outside established institutions. The Reader is a collective digest and journey along seminal curatorial threads we would like to share and discuss, with a focus on the entanglements of the roles of the artist and the curator.

In "CURARE: Sustainable Curating" you will find an introduction to ways of following a sustainable and in-depth curatorial model leading you to questions about how to adapt your curatorial practice and team to the current and future climate and environment. Curating has the potential to become a practice of "taking care" (Latin: "cura", meaning: "the care, the cure") of artworks, narratives, people, teams, audiences and nature, along with the many other organisms that live on Earth at large. The attitude of the curator, but also the leader of any team, needs to adapt or

change as working conditions and contents change. Hence, this contribution here serves as a protocol or inspirational step-by-step guide to 'deep curating' or 'sustainable curating'. The guide is formulated as a series of questions about time, output, resources, media use, narratives, production, mobility and presence that is applicable to different local contexts and can help address and enforce sustainable exhibition making.

This in turn will positively impact on the aesthetic result and quality of the exhibition experience overall.

Exhibition making is a hands-on concept describing the process of curating. In his elaborate text titled "Exhibition Making" Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung discusses experimental exhibition making, the crafting of spaces, and storytelling as a curatorial practice. He shares his methods that he has been developing within the context of SAVVY Contemporary — laboratory of form-ideas, Berlin, in an illuminating dialogue with the CURARE team. "Starting this space was daring enough, but we thought that we had another story to tell. And I think the whole process of SAVVY has been about telling those other stories. What I know is

that exhibition making is storytelling. There's a reason why SAVVY is called a laboratory of form-ideas, because, as I said, it's all about experimentation. We all try things out here, and then we do exhibitions in other places. I think that the question as to what curating is cannot only be answered theoretically," says the founder of Savvy Contemporary, Berlin, and future director of Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, from 2023 onwards. "Exhibition making" describes how Ndikung practically works as a curator, selects artists, and deals with diverse obstacles in biennials such as in "Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie" in Mali, 2020, and big recurring art events like Sonsbeek 2021-24, in Arnhem, Netherlands, where the concept concerns labour and sound, asking "What stories do we want to tell? Where do we find these stories?"

In the following pre-documenta 15 text "Parasitic Curating and Rotating Roles" two members of ruangrupa (the curators of documenta 15), Ade Damawan and Iswanto Hartono, introduce their Jakarta-based interdisciplinary collective. In ruangrupa every member works on many different jobs next to their collective art projects, and this seems to be a recipe for keeping the interdisciplinary curatorial group together for more than 20 years.

Ade Damawan gives an insight into the political background of ruangrupa: "When we met in the 1990s, we started by criticising power and the establishment. Power is also one of the factors that we constantly question in a lot of different ways. We know that we also live within this power structure, we experience it in our daily life. Curating is also a product of that relationship. We do organic curating. It is really about formality and informality."

Ruangrupa also speak about their lumbung practice behind documenta 15. To this day they succeed in finding (informal) ways of working in parallel with, or even 'parasitically' from within, existing power structures.

DAMAWAN: "I think a collective practice is healthier when everyone is bringing their own resources with them rather than thinking collectively as being the main resource. That's what we talk about with our lumbung idea (lumbung means collective rice barn or storage in Indonesian) as a concept of gathering knowledge, artists and people for documenta."

With documenta 15, not a theme, but a practice is the starting point of the curatorial concept. As Damawan puts it:

"(...) lumbung refers to a way of working (...). We are trying not to see documenta 15 as the end of it, but are thinking of ways to go beyond that."

In "Shaping an Institution" Krist Gruijthuisen explains: "Now, I'm talking to you from the position of being a director of an institution. (...) That is also a very clear autonomous practice that brings a lot of different things together — I am either running the institution or editing books or producing performances or making exhibitions of my own, the role doesn't just entail being the director of an institution. There are many ways to approach this role, 'to tackle instituting', as one says these days. We are restructuring and re-establishing the institution internally now. (...) I didn't want to build an institution that's moulded after one person or one voice that decides everything. I don't think that this represents the time we live in anymore (...)" Later he explains how he develops KW into a multi-vocal space, "That's why we built up a larger curatorial team. I did that to have more input, but also to tap into more issues within the city. (...) I also wanted to give curators more time to go in-depth into certain research topics.

That said, we are an artist-driven institution. So, we're not HKW (Abbreviation for "Haus der Kulturen der Welt", English: "House of World Cultures"), we're not a research-based institution. The research always translates into an artistic venture." Gruijthuisen's interview narrates how the ambition to embrace multiple communities in KW is backed up by the collaboration with many different, extraordinary artistic voices, as well as by a space for the production of art itself, as opposed to its sole representation.

Along the lines of artist-curating and artists shaping influential institutions, Raqs Media Collective, founded in Delhi, India, in 1992, here represented by two of the three members, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, opens the door to their curatorial practice and to ways of how the "infra-curatorial" functions in regards to collective curating. In "Practicing Collectivity: What is possible and not yet forbidden?" Jeebesh Bagchi explains that "as a collective, we start on specific threads by generating an axial moment or theme or drawing in a source and then we try to think of the various "shifts" that this produces. One of the questions that has occupied us since our inception is that of the "arena". We are interested in looking within the "arena" at infrastructures and relationships that bring people together, as well as the knowledge, sentiments, thresholds, and affects that are

produced from it. Two more concepts important to us are what we call "minor practices" and "infra-practices". "Minor practices" are practices that keep "infra-practices" in operation, that transform infrastructures."

In the early 2000s, years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic situation, where many residencies and lectures now naturally can take place online, Raqs Media Collective had already been working with the idea of artistic online and offline "co-presences" for decades, both as a collective and with fellows. Sarai was an umbrella organisation instituted by them that hosted around 600 interdisciplinary fellowships on- and offline in India, created discourses and published the Sarai Reader 01-09. Shuddhabrata Sengupta says that the key to pushing the frontiers of creativity in the urban sphere lies in paying attention to what is not yet forbidden:

"Many of the things that are possible are not yet forbidden and what is not yet forbidden is a space of openness where you can push the frontiers of what culture is, what contemporary art is, what intellectual life is, what can be thought and spoken and said in a city."

From the collective and urban trajectory, we move on to study the insights of DIY curating during the COVID-19-related lockdowns in Berlin. Over the course of 2020 and 2021, Övül Ö. Durmuşoğlu and Joanna Warsza crafted and realised the successful curatorial project "Die Balkone" (German: "the balconies") with more than 50 artists in their neighbourhood, Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin. Subsequently, they co-authored the text "Art as — Recovery, Necessity, Togetherness — On Die Balkone and on what to go back to and what not?". As an immediate remedy to the lack of mutual inspiration amongst creative practitioners, the creatives, intimacy, sociability, and simultaneously propelling ideas for new creative formats of local curating, they invented this viral art event that took place on private balconies and house facades in Berlin. What is now a legendary story of how the display of art returned home to its neighbourhood and roots of production, started like this: "It was a warm sunny afternoon despite the state of exception. We sat on a bench and talked about hope and possibilities, which brought us to talk about the balconies and their political history as stages of resilience and as places both private and public at the same time. Balconies as terraces of openness and hope, as well as platforms for authoritarianism and supremacy (...)" The text is a vivid account by

two of Berlin's acclaimed international curators and ends with a plea for DIY freelance curatorship with the potential to invent new entrepreneurial and urgent concepts.

In the following interview, curator Agustín Pérez Rubio speaks about the 11th Berlin biennale, which he co-curated together with María Berríos, Renata Cervetto, and Lisette Lagnado, in 2020, also in times of lockdowns. The biennial, entitled "The Crack Begins Within", covered important themes such as mental health, psychological and integrity-related constraints as a consequence of abuse and colonisation. "Decolonising the Mind - Curating in Times of Crises" includes reflections on the curatorial and especially artistic approaches to restituting the histories, minds, and sensitivities at large affected by long-term effects of colonisation mainly in Latin America.



"Imagine that until the 1990s, the books, the educational books for children, in the entirety of Latin America, mainly came from two Spanish publishers. And they were called "The discovery of the Americas" — not the conquest but the discovery of the Americas! So even in their own countries, they learn that they "discovered" Argentina, Brazil etc. This coloniality is implied — it is implied that the knowledge comes "from Europe to us"".

Furthermore, Pérez explains how the pandemic precautions influenced the collective curatorial work, the spatial strategies of the biennial, and the exhibition design.

As a shift towards the subject of artistic practice and to round off the Reader, the following and final text revolves around the artist as researcher. What is artistic research? How do artists and scientists collaborate? When is the exhibition a laboratory? Christina Landbrecht, the programme director at the Ernst Schering Foundation's Project Space, Berlin, reminds us that "we need the lab to disrupt our habits of seeing, to disrupt our sense of scale (...)". The interview carries the title "It is wrong to expect art to be scientific knowledge production!". According to her curatorial experience supporting and conducting processes of artistic research, art is not here to generate scientific knowledge. Based on the concrete example of the exhibition "TEMPERATE" by artist Susanne M. Winterling, she reflects: "Do artists have to supply the world with innovations? Perhaps there are even cases where art and science collaborations lead to new findings that might eventually even result in the filing of a new patent. That is completely legitimate, but it would be a completely wrong expectation of an artist. And this is precisely why research in art should mean something different to the meaning the term research has in science. Artistic research should be regarded as a way of shaking certainties and taking a new, bold look at what we thought was 'true'." Left to say is only to enjoy the threads and shifts discussed and proposed here in the CURARE Reader.

Solvej

Helweg Ovesen

CURARE:

Sustainable

and Deep

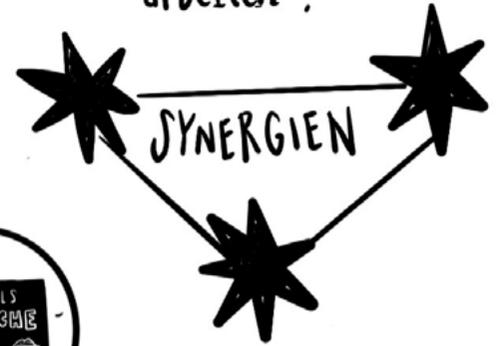
Curating

mit jungen Künstler-
innen arbeiten



Menschen zusammenbringen um über komplexe Themen zu sprechen

Widersprüche ermöglichen mit Künstlern arbeiten!



Teil von Kollektiven Prozessen

Cre-
teur



KUNST ALS SPRACHE SPIELT EINE ROLLE

ZUGANG

Interdis-
ziplinär



gesellschaftliche Reflektion

CONNaisseur



TANZ



Kunst ist, was mich berührt

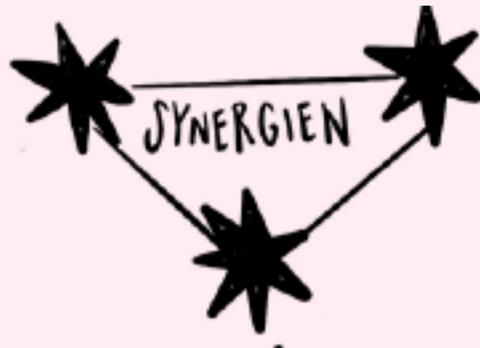
WAS ERFAHRE ICH HIER ?



mit jungen Künstler-
innen arbeiten

Bewegungsgeschichte sichtbar werden lassen

WARUM?
WAS IST DER
GRUND
EINE AUSSTELLUNG
ZU MACHEN ?



“Sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Gro Harlem Brundtland, 1987

“CURARE” in Latin means “to take care”. A curator is someone who takes care of, and oversees exhibitions, but today a curator has to care of much more. The care part increases in our times of crises and the overall acceleration of living, working and producing. In my view, the curator is someone who takes care of the next generation’s needs all the while negotiating visions and choices of artists in the here and now, generating knowledge, planning pay rolls, applying for funding, writing, leading teams and managing human resources. Not to mention also handling material resources, defining the project pace, and thus managing stress of the collective body behind the artwork production, up to caring about the carbon-dioxide emissions of the artists’ and audience’s travels. To curate sustainably today is to care about the production of artworks, redistribution of resources, the carbon footprint as well as the people we work with and who will live with the footprint even after the completion of projects. Furthermore, learning from our predecessors (curators, artists, technicians) is also crucial. On the level of authorship and the passing on of knowledge, we can learn from their experience in making exhibitions with low or no electricity consumption, low emission or land

travels as opposed to carbon intensive flights. Secondly, these predecessors unfortunately left us with a negative climate development beyond human reach due to their lifestyles and consumption habits. We need to critically assess those and counter them with alternative hands-on strategies.

This text is about my position and practice as a curator and presents the model for sustainable curating that I have been developing and practising as a leader of an art institution and in the frame of various festivals over the past decade. It is crucial for me that the quality of an art experience stays on a high level aesthetically speaking and on a deep level content-wise, while the use of resources for this very art experience remains low and efficient. It is important to let especially time, but also exchange with artists, communities, experts, and audiences, work for and towards our final exhibition result.

“Low carbon exhibitions require extra planning, innovation, and shifting of some of the aesthetic standards of traditional exhibitions. Such approaches should be seen as in line with a global turn in curating towards socially engaged projects and slow curating. Take the pressure off yourself and take some pressure off the climate.”

Synthetic Collective

Why Sustainable Curating?

Almost a decade ago I started developing a curatorial and institutional approach that I describe as a “sustainable curating model”. It is a way of working with resources consciously, with a focus on quality, engaging healthily with teams and artists, materials, timeframes, recovery, presence, transport, media, research, communities, and knowledge production as a response to neoliberal mechanisms of acceleration, overproduction, high carbon-dioxide emissions, and exploitative means of exhibition making.

Shifting exhibitions, international blockbuster shows and biennials, as well as art fairs, produce a serious carbon footprint and leave a tremendous amount of waste behind them; they are often executed under stressful working conditions with burn outs as a result, on limited budgets, having notorious underpayment of artists as a their consequence. This kind of practice is questionable for many reasons. What is the alternative? Can we find models that function for everyone involved?

Furthermore, the field of curating exhibitions changes as much as our global reality changes. In the last decade a series of system collapses, ecological catastrophes and other ground shaking events related to resource conflicts such as the current war in Ukraine, affected our needs and possibilities of creating and leasing visions. The “cura” part (from Latin: “CURARE”, meaning: “to take care of”) has been becoming ever more important in our curating jobs and curatorial concepts. Taking care of both artworks, meanings, people, teams, audiences, nature and the many organisms that exist on Earth at large. The attitude of the curator, but also the leader of any team, immediately needs to adopt or change when working conditions and content flip. My contribution to the CURARE Curatorial Studies programme—which I founded together with the City of Berlin—and to the field of curating in general, is a protocol or inspirational step-by-step guide to what I call “deep curating” or “sustainable curating”. The guide is formulated as a series of questions and hopefully functions in different local contexts.



Deep Curating

Deep curating is both a leadership form involving feedback loops (strategy adjustment according to running peer group and team evaluations) and a way of curating, i.e. developing high quality exhibitions — content-wise and aesthetically. It is a rhythmical process of integrating all aspects of exhibition making. It is circular, content-driven, deeply rooted aesthetically, yet blossoming, aware and available for sharing. It is a formula of creative space making which adds to urban development and serves as both a local sustainable practice and a guidance for survival. Deep curating is caring for a narrative that never ends, but hosts many ruptures and a strong commitment to the debate of values, sensations or conflicts with our allies. Deep curating replaces resource waste with added time, time that can be spent recycling creativity per exhibition.

I had the privilege of working non-commercially in the communal Galerie Wedding — Space For Contemporary Art, in Berlin's central district, where I acted as both director and curator, curating on and off with other select curators since 2015. This work experience enabled me to develop a consistent model of deep curating. I had the time to play out seem-

ingly unresolvable conflicts of interest in contemporary and future models of cohabitation, community and society building in the context of contemporary art and performance.

I have run, and fine-tuned, the model over the past 8 years in one institution where the focus was to practise an ever more sustainable way of curating, sharing knowledge and developing long-term narratives, spaces and processes as well as resources. However, I trust that these ideas can be adapted to many different curatorial practices. I call this format of making exhibitions 'slow' or 'deep' curating: Over the course of one year, one artist and one or two curators, along with the gallery team, flesh out a subject together and produce an extended solo exhibition with context-specific artworks — often together with a network of partners, performers and thinkers.

The entire team dives into and co-creates a specific artistic vision, discourse or universe while preparing the exhibition. An exhibition here is not just the final haptic or ephemeral result of this process, but a social space of knowledge-sharing and communal acting, experimenting as well as empowerment. An exhibition does not per se have a media chan-



nel. The media in my view has to follow the content — if a beer or beer campaign speaks better about how to surpass racist stereotyping, then the key to developing the exhibition is brewing a beer as we did with Emeka Ogborn in “Original Sufferhead”, 2016, and “Beast of No Nation”, 2018. Beer brewing, i.e. the creation of a taste based on demographic data, the narrative of its ingredients and an artistically staged ‘advertising campaign’ thus become the channel of communication itself.

Deep curating can mean shaping according to content, going wide socially, delving deep artistically, and allowing for discursive conflict and research while taking time, sourcing carbon-neutral materials and solutions, and exchanging perspectives amongst co-authors of an art project. Ideally, this allows for an artistic oeuvre, vision, or an urban situation to be lit up from within, above and behind, and to be shared amongst a group of people for an indeterminate amount of time. We have invited artists from around the world to Galerie Wedding, who live, temporarily reside, and work in Berlin, to exchange ideas with our audiences as well as with us as the team, about how to reach out to each other beyond our differences.

We have probed artistic propositions, universes and networks that empower experts and non-experts alike, to think ‘beyond’ privileged patriarchal, white, healthy or capitalist positions where one ‘does not have to worry’ about each other, about the future, money, safety, health or education.

We, in the different and sometimes overlapping teams I have led, have given ourselves time and emotional space to think about and engage critically with sustainable exhibition making, demographic flows, structural and everyday racism, the problems of homogenised and hegemonic ethnic, social, and aesthetic ‘Reinheit’ (English: purity). This new model of curating wishes to empower newcomers and creative minds uniting the Global South and North in one conflictual body, while dealing with the difficulty of undoing our own privileges and prejudices, with respect to our own vulnerability.



Sustainable Curating, step by step

In this second and last part of my text I will present a guide to sustainable and deep curating, which also considers questions that may come up in the process of developing one's own sustainable curatorial model.

1. TIME Long-term collaborations with local artists create deeper narratives

An essential element in sustainable curating and artwork production is to work with local artists or artists who are already regularly visiting. In the event that there won't be any other option than to fly someone into the country, then the length of stay of the artist should be extended accordingly in order to encourage deeper collaboration and long-term processes which help broaden knowledge-sharing.

An even more motivating factor— for me at least — is that such long-term collaborations with the artists and production teams, i.e. their artwork and exhibition content, tend to promote deeper and more poignant narratives for the audiences. The bridging between local and global readings of an artwork becomes clearer and more precise. More often than not

these new commissions, artwork productions or performances end up travelling to more institutions and are being seen by more people.

2. REUSING and extending existing artworks and materials. Is it possible?

Reusing materials and developing existing works is an integral part of a sustainable curating practice. Not everything has to be new. When we present an artwork or an exhibition, it is best practice curatorially speaking to verify if there is an already existing work that can be developed further in terms of its content. This would help minimise overproduction and over-information. On a more practical level, it is important to search for technical solutions to lower electricity consumption when setting up an exhibition (example: an artwork's sound is only played when a member of the audience enters the exhibition space and triggers the movement sensor linked to the artwork. So the sound doesn't play non-stop, even when there's no-one in the space, unnecessarily consuming energy) and to check with local providers if reusing material for display or the work itself is possible. Make a list

of local sustainable firms, printers and providers to have at hand.

3. LIMIT TRAVELS and transport.
Can this be done?

Over the past decades, many exhibitions and artist collaborations have been short-term international exchanges, prepared in a hurry. This is the sure way to large cargo transports of artworks, international and transcontinental flights for only a couple of days, and pricey production costs. Art fairs and biennials are often examples of such high CO2 emission events. As we still live in times where access to recycled materials takes longer than to their non-sustainable counterparts, this time pressure prevents us from finding recycled materials and inventing ecological solutions. So slowing down the exhibition making process overall, including the setting up part, with the artist and institutional teams from eg. 2 months to 6-12 months, involving artist residencies and overland travel, will provide time for sustainable low-emission transport and alternative local solutions, thus eliminating the amount of human and material transport.

4. DO LESS events and exhibitions, spread them out geographically, and gain more funding and attention for each one. Can the amount of events be less?

With sustainable curating, the quality instead of quantity of exhibitions and events is very important. I spend a lot of time synchronising themes and interests to create less, more dense exhibitions, festivals and programmes with more funding and audience. We need to be critical about the accelerated increase of cultural offers in capitals and be able to spread them more geographically, including the margins of big cities or densely populated regions. Sustainable curating means providing access to art to new audiences.

5. PING PONG WITH OTHER CURATORS and Overarching Themes: can communities, networks, research and discourses be entangled?

As an organic narrative in my curatorial work, collaborating with other curators in a ping pong fashion, I developed overarch-

ing themes spanning two years, such as “Post-Otherness Wedding POW”, “Unsustainable Privileges UP”, “Soft Solidarity SoS”, and “Existing Otherwise XO”. These themes build upon each other and respond to the current zeitgeist or crises, connecting contemporaries, the next generation, and predecessors, bringing together artists, curators and audiences. Experiences are being transferred, so discourses can be developed sustainably, and audiences turn into a community.

This ping pong approach to curating naturally challenges monopoly positions amongst curators and artist communities. It is crucial for my proposed sustainable and deep curating model to exchange with other curators as a long-term commitment, continuously searching for artists beyond the confines of a curator’s own country of residence and across all age groups. In doing so, we prevent ourselves from being locked inside our own curator ego, limited imagination and knowledge, but instead, dynamically develop our curatorial practice in a healthy feedback loop with all the other curators involved. In the same vein, I always support artist and thinker collaborations —the curator does not have to be the only exchange partner for the artist.

To print a book or publish an ebook is an experience as well as knowledge production. The act of archiving and sharing knowledge is a sustainable way of thinking about learning: the experiences and knowledge are no longer only kept in-house, but are being passed on to others who might be interested and benefit from such experiences and knowledge. Within that context, choosing what needs printing as well as finding a sustainably operating printer, becomes equally important.

FOCUSSED COMMUNICATION

Is it possible to create a focussed and peaceful space for communication and education?

It is important to meet teams and artists in person, create rituals and regular meeting times, so that they don’t become subject to constant interruptions and can share knowledge in an undisturbed fashion. Considering the notoriously rapid flow of correspondence via emails, instant messages and Zoom calls, sustainable curating aims at fostering efficiency in meetings all the while limiting the round-the-clock availability of all the people involved in the exhibition making. Practically speaking, this implies reducing the amount of

messages —of any kind— exchanged, as well as setting up defined work hours (no evening and weekend work as a basic rule of thumb). With the omni-presence of the digital screen and an internalised attitude towards self-exploitation due to neoliberalism, many people have unlearned how to pace themselves. In terms of press work and distribution, it is important to send out consistent and thorough material when reaching out to audiences, as opposed to “spamming” them with daily messages on social media for instance. It is important to be mindful about the amount of information that is being put out through an art institution’s PR channels, be they posters, flyers, photos, texts, videos, or digital data in general. Questions that should accompany the PR work are: can I reduce the amount of information I send out, how much data do I really need to promote the work, how many posters are really necessary to be printed?

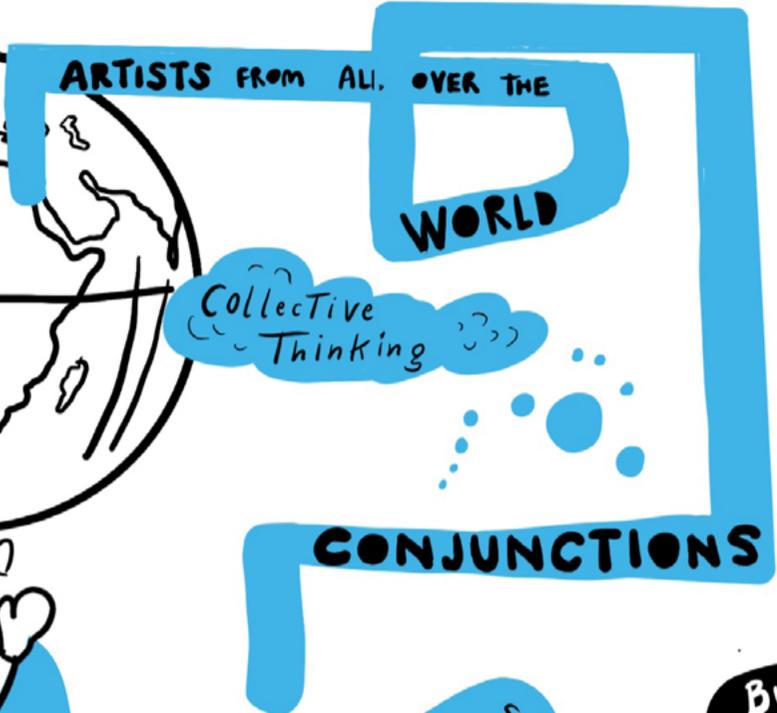
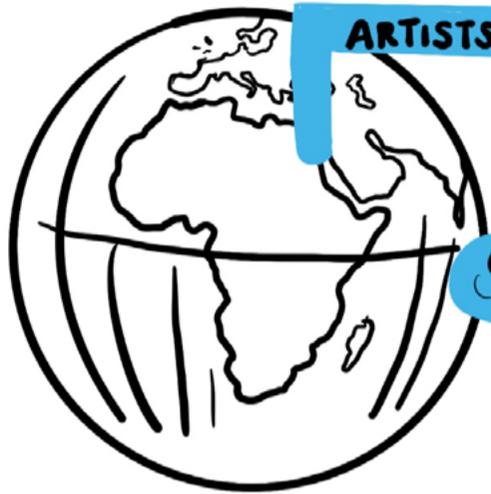
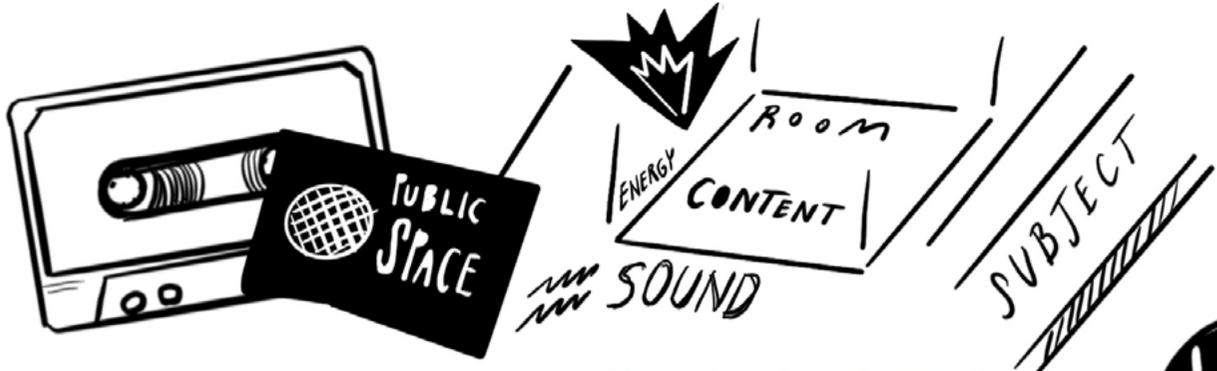
It is furthermore key to incorporate regeneration time for staff, artists, audiences and oneself—whether this means breaks between exhibitions, events, at conferences or in your own speech or whether it is dealing with recovery from work, a crisis, physical or mental illness. When it comes to communication, the sustainable curating model foresees time and space for pauses, dialogues, sessions, and an environment of care and connectivity. This will lay the ground for a curatorial work experience based on sustainable efficiency.

Solvej Helweg Ovesen is a curator, author, and cultural studies theoretician (MA in Communication and Cultural Studies from Copenhagen University). She completed the De Appel Curatorial Training Programme in Amsterdam in 2003. In 2020, together with Ute Müller-Tischler, she founded and tutored in the education programme “CURARE” aimed at Berlin-based curators working for the City of Berlin. She currently is the artistic director of Galerie Wedding — Space for Contemporary Art, Berlin, where she realised the curatorial programmes “Post-Otherness Wedding” (2015-16), “Unsustainable Privileges” (2017-18), “Soft Solidarity” (2019-2020) and “Existing Otherwise” (2021-2022) with co-curators Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Nataša Ilić, Övül Ö. Durmuşoğlu, and Isabel Lewis. She was the artistic director of the group exhibition “Existing Otherwise — The Future of Coexistence” (2022) with Ibrahim Mahama at SCCA, Redclay Studio and Nkrumah Volini in Tamale, Northern Ghana. On this occasion, she founded XO Curatorial Projects together with cultural producer Katrin Pohlmann, with whom she then conceived and realised the interdisciplinary festival Movement Research ACROSS (2022-) in Berlin. In 2018, she was associate curator of the first Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art (RIBOCA1) — “Everything was forever, until it was no more” directed by Katharina Gregos. In 2017 she was a member of the curatorial consortium for the Danish Pavilion representing Kirstine Roepstorff, “INFLUENZA — Theatre of Glowing Darkness” at La Biennale di Venezia — 57th International Art Exhibition.

Bonaventure
Soh Bejeng
Ndikung
Exhibition
Making



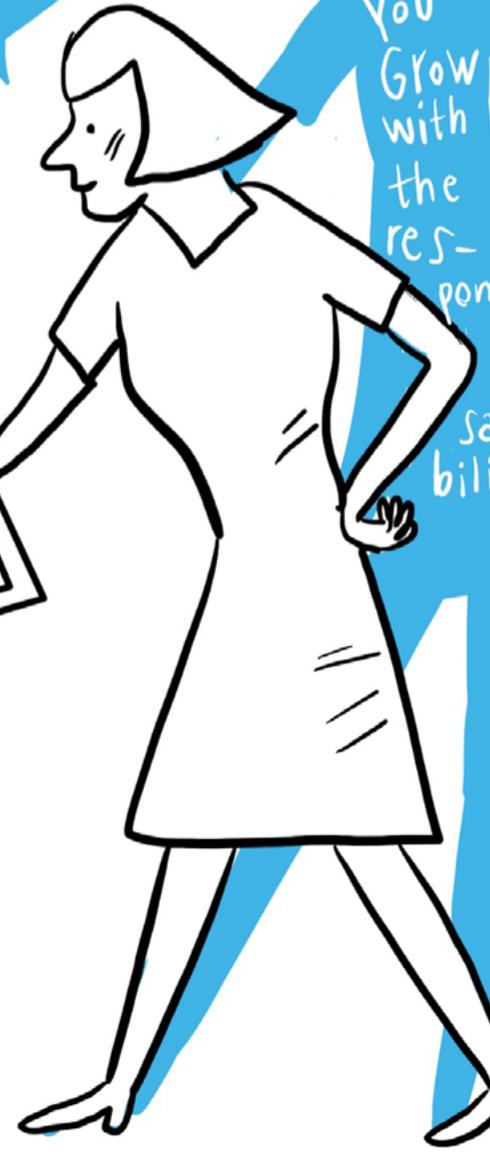
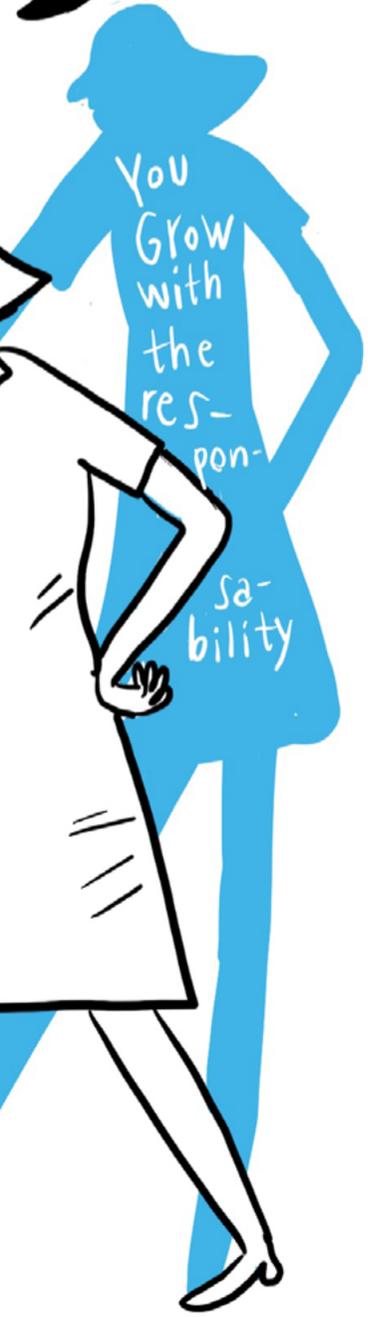
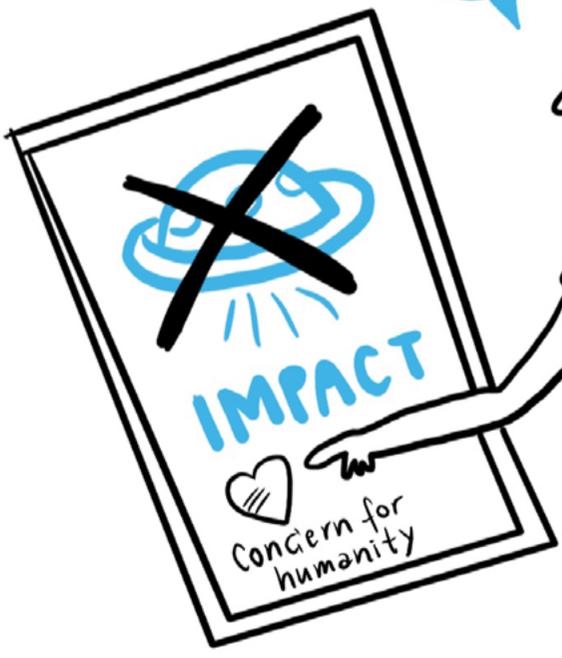
DOING PRACTICAL THINGS



FIND THE STORIES

BUILDING ON THE THINGS THAT ARE ALREADY THERE - REFERENCING

not every-thing is right



DARING TELLING THOSE OTHER STORIES

EXHIBITION-MAKING = STORYTELLING



Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung: I'm very happy for every chance I get to communicate and share the little I know. We've been running SAVVY for the past 11 years, since 2009, and it's more or less an experimental space. I associate curating with experimentation. It's very much about daring to do stuff. It was a very daring act to say that we're going to create an art space in Berlin at a time when there are quite a lot of art spaces around. And that's the first question to ask yourself: "Why do you need the space?" Starting this space was daring enough, but we thought that we had another story to tell. And I think the whole process of SAVVY has been about telling those other stories. What I know is that exhibition making is storytelling.

There's a reason why SAVVY is called a laboratory of form-ideas, because, as I said, it's all about experimentation. We all try things out here, and then we do exhibitions in other places. I think that the question as to what curating is cannot only be answered theoretically. One has to answer in a practical way. I was curating the photography biennial in Bamako, Mali last year, and during a conference one of the speakers started his presentation with a picture of me. He had taken

the picture on the day of the opening when I was on a ladder trying to change the light. He started the conference by saying that this is what curating is, doing very practical things as well. It's far from just sitting there and writing brilliant concepts. Everybody can write a brilliant concept, but putting things in relation to one another in a way that they can tell stories is even more important.

I am currently working on a project in Arnhem, which was supposed to start this year in the summer, but unfortunately, because of COVID-19, we had to postpone it. With a team of five curators we're doing two editions of Sonsbeek Festival (Netherlands), 2020 and 2024. Sonsbeek is a historical exhibition; it's actually the third oldest of such large-scale exhibitions. There is the Venice Biennial, the Whitney Biennial and then Sonsbeek which was initiated in 1949 as a post-war project that saw art as a possibility of reconciliation. So, it's a very seminal exhibition project. We're working on something called force times distance with the team, which is a formula for work. We're actually looking at labour and sonic ecology. The thematic framework includes all forms of labour, from paid to unpaid. In terms of the format, we're

trying to make exhibitions in different public spaces, which is also what is expected of us. When I received the invitation to apply for Sonsbeek, one of the first questions I had to answer was: “What is a public space? How do we think of and expand public space?” I thought of outdoor public spaces but also looked at museums as public spaces, looked at the radio as a public space, the Internet as a public sphere. We tried to conceive an exhibition that could manifest itself in all these different spaces – that was our methodology.

Because sound plays an important role in my work, we tried to create the possibility of narrating stories around labour through music and sound – for example, we included the songs of seamen, of sailors, the songs of the workers at the plantations, and so on and so forth. There is no particular way in which I came to the subject of labour. The call was the following: propose something contemporary, something that is very unique to our time. So, I thought, that I wanted to propose something that has always been unique with every time, that has always been contemporary. And the question of labour is, in my opinion, something that has always been contemporary. In all ages, we’ve had issues

with labour, labour rights, how much people are paid or even not paid at all. We can see what happened a few months ago, even when everybody was social distancing, people still had to be imported to Germany to dig out the asparagus or work at the meat factories – labour always plays an important role

I was looking at labour and trying to find ways of narrating it, so the question that came about was: “What medium should we use?” And to me, the sonic became a very important medium in expressing this narrative. I was thinking of protest songs – all worker’s unions have these songs, that’s how they share their problems etc.

Normally, when you’re invited to do a biennial like this, you have a year or two to prepare, then you come to the place, you do everything quickly and you leave. If you’re lucky, people will understand what you are trying to do, if you’re not lucky, you are just like a UFO that lands in the place and then you leave and there’s little or no impact left behind. What we’re trying to do is to advocate towards the stretching of that format, by doing two editions in which we will focus on two main points, one in 2021 and one in



2024. But we also do a lot of things in between, residency programmes, educational programmes, performances, we invite artists to come and spend a longer time in Arnhem and so on. We are trying to rethink the format of a large-scale exhibition. Originally, I wanted to focus on Arnhem as a small city, but the more I thought about it, the more I wanted to stretch it out in terms of geography.

Sonsbeek in the past mainly included sculpture, architecture and installations. In 1972, Rick Vermeulen did an important edition of Sonsbeek that was about technology. There were a lot of sound works involved, there were exhibitions happening in phone booths around the city and in other places in the Netherlands. So, people in the past have experimented in different ways. When ruangrupa did the last edition, I'm building on that history, there's not much I'm inventing. It's really about building on what already exists and that is very important for me in terms of methodology. I don't want to discover anything, I don't want to invent much, I want to build on that which exists. There's a kind of fetish of invention, while most things have already been invented. It's about identifying what is there and building and giving credit to those things

that already exist. In a lot of cases, people will come and say, "I invented this" which most times will be a lie, usually somebody else already did it. I want to be cautious about this. When you do an exhibition like this, you're not inventing the world, you're building on what is already there. This is called the politics of referencing.

What is also very important for me, is that the curatorial team includes many people. I really like collective thinking. That is why at SAVVY, at any given time, at least 25 people are thinking and working on different subjects, and even though sometimes it's not very coordinated, things come together eventually. That's the beauty of it, it's not always perfectly choreographed.

CURARE participant How do you research artists for Sonsbeek?

BSBN I think there were about 16 curators that were invited from around the world. Once you were invited you had to make a proposal, where you were asked to include the names of a few artists who you would want to work with. I was looking at people who are working on the topic of labour and whose practic-



es are influenced by sound. Then I was appointed artistic director and I started thinking about who to include in the curatorial team. I knew that I wanted to work with mostly Netherlands-based curators. Also, whenever I do a project somewhere in the world, at least one person from SAVVY comes along. This time it was Antonia Alampi. We wanted to work with curators based in the Netherlands, so we were looking at people in the Netherlands who were not necessarily seen in the mainstream narrative as Dutch curators. So, we included Amal Alhag whose parents are from Somalia or Vincent van Velsen and so on. It's important to be able to express the multiplicity of histories within that particular space.

Then the next thing was to think of who could fit in this concept. It's always a two-way street. You are looking for artists that are already working on this topic and also looking for artists who you think you could challenge to work in this particular direction. It's always in these two different directions that I go. The second thing is, and this is an important part of our practice, that we always make sure that we do not only invite European artists. We try to invite artists from a wide range of geogra-

phies and cultural bearings to be part of the exhibition. We also make sure that we do not only invite men because that is the tendency – every time you look at a panel you see five men sitting there. We try to be sensitive about those things, at SAVVY these topics are constantly in question. These are some of the criteria we consider and, of course, the issue of medium – who can work with sculpture or sound for instance. We also invited painters, for example, Violet Kootenay, who's a brilliant painter from Zimbabwe. She is incredibly young, only 25 years old, but she's one of the most fantastic painters I know. I had never met her in person before, I just knew her work from seeing it in exhibitions. I met her for the first time when I invited her to the Netherlands to come for a site visit. I thought she was somebody I could commission to make some new works. There was a particular story that I knew I wanted to be commissioned to a painter. The story is the following:

We went to visit one of the castles in Arnhem. It was a beautiful castle, and it was full of paintings of 18th-century dark bourgeoisie. Which is fine, I don't have a problem with that. I asked the people at the castle about how the owners got their wealth since our project is

DARING
 — TELLING
 THOSE OTHER
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 EXHIBITION-
 MAKING =
 STORYTELLING

about labour. What work did they do? How did they get the money? If they had told me straight on that these guys had plantations all over the world, it would have been OK. But it was quite strange, because they were trying to hide it from me. I just wanted to understand. The more I asked, the more embarrassed they got and the more I thought there was something there. I went there four times and they told me eventually that they had a plantation in Indonesia and a plantation in Surinam. So, then I asked since we're talking about work, "Do you know if they brought any people from Indonesia and Suriname? Did they enslave people?" We're talking about the 18th century, right in the middle of the slave enterprise. They started saying that they didn't really know. So, we started digging in the documents and then they told me there's just one case of a lady who is called the black Anna, die Schwarze Anna. I found this interesting. I asked if they knew any stories of the black Anna. And they said no, they only had two statements where she is mentioned.

One says that she was on a boat. She had taken the kids of the owner of the plantations from Surinam, and brought them over to Europe

where she took care of them for her whole life. The second case in which she is mentioned is that she fell sick one day and a medical doctor was brought in.

The family that owns the castle is actually considered to be one of the kindest families in the area because they could bring in the medical doctor for the enslaved person. The proof is found in accounting. It's written that they paid the medical doctor a certain amount of money. I asked, "Do you have anything that says how much money they paid Anna?" There was no proof of that. Although there was meticulous documentation of finances, there was no reference of any payment going to her, even though she offers labour. So, I started thinking about Eurasia, thinking about the fact that I entered into that space and there was nothing said about that history. I started thinking that there are many others who might have been there whose stories have been erased, and I thought of inviting Violet who is a figurative painter, to imagine the life of the "black Anna" in that space. I thought of inviting the right to imagine a fictional narrative of the life of Anna. I started working on this and the fifth time

I visited the castle they told me that they're no longer interested in a collaboration. That is how the story almost ends. The invitation of the artist is also based on the stories that one wants to tell. As I said, making exhibitions, at least to me, is about telling stories. This particular story demanded that kind of artist. We're going to continue the project somehow in another place. It takes away the context, but I think that the fact that we cannot do it in the castle is also part of the story. We'll do it somewhere else, and we'll still tell the story somehow.

Another example would be the following. In Arnhem, like in the bigger part of the Netherlands, in the past years, they've been shutting down the red-light districts. Holland used to be known as a place with huge red-light districts. In Amsterdam, they are cutting them down while in Arnhem they are shutting them down almost completely. Sex labour is labour, and the fact that you shut down the red-light district doesn't mean that people are going to stop doing the work, actually, and a lot of people have made research on this, you basically take them out of the light, into darkness. It means that the people doing sex labour then become even more vulnerable. They used to

pay taxes, they used to be out there, but when you push them out of that light, it means that the pimps become more violent, their clients become more violent and so on and so forth. We started exploring this, and we started looking around to find who is working on this topic, and we found one or two artists who have been thinking about sex labour. The stories that we meet in the space inform the directions we take and the kind of answers that we want to invite.

But there are other models, and the other example I wanted to give you is of a completely different model. Mali has a very long history of photography, which some people say is as old as photography itself. Going back to the 1800s, in the late 1830s, which is when photography is said to have been invented. The country has also produced seminal photographers, incredible people. In 1994, a couple of photographers came together and founded a biennial for African photography in Mali. Because the Africans were not invited to the festival of photography in Arles, they did their own thing. It's called *the Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie*. It is kind of a meeting point of photography, people of African origin from all over the world suddenly come

together. It's a beautiful, incredible event.

A few years ago, I got a call to propose something for the festival and was told that I would have nine months to do this, which is crazy. There was almost no money, only 500.000 Euros. So, again, exhibition making is not only about ideas, it's also about hustling for money. You can have beautiful ideas after that. We had a budget of 500.000 Euros to do a biennial, of which 250.000 Euros came from the state of Mali and 250.000 Euros from the Institut Français. The Institut Français gave its own money, but when it comes to Mali, that's a different question, and until now, I don't know where the money is. But I still had to make this happen, because I was in it. So, I invited curators from different parts of the continent to come together. The festival states that you have to do an open call, because it's trying to remove hierarchies. It's incredible, because hitherto completely unknown photographers send their works there. We set up a jury, with different curators and we had to look at a huge number of applicants to select just a few works – but we succeeded. I wanted to create a mix of people, so that we would choose both from the open call and also artists who are working on the topic I was interested in.

The title was *Streams of Consciousness*^[1] and we had invited 90 artists, of which 10 were collectives. I was interested in collective practices in photography and studio practice as a collective practice. Collectives like Invisible Brothers, or Kamoinge that were founded in the early 1960s in the US at a time when African-American photographers were not being published. The only black photographer that was known at the time was Gordon Parks. The others were not given any attention, people wouldn't publish their works and they weren't invited to exhibitions and so on – so, they decided to come together. Kamoinge still exists and holds meetings on a monthly basis in New York. They recruit young photographers. It's become a bit like a school, it's one of the most important photography movements in the 20th century.

So, these are different methodologies, and depending on where one finds oneself, one acts differently. You now see works of Malian photographers in the Pompidou and so on, but these works were never made to be presented in these big exhibition halls, they were made to be presented in family homes. That is what I tried to do at the festival, to find families who would be happy for people, strangers, to

come in and see the way we display works in there. A few, I think five families, agreed to do that. And it was incredible to see photography exhibited in their spaces.

Solvej Helweg Ovesen I was talking earlier about the number of new spaces you have actually founded. How important is that in terms of content?

BSBN The thing is, there is just so much you can do in certain spaces. I do not belong, for example, to the curators who want to go and change a museum. I don't want to decolonise any museum, I'm not interested in that. What I'm interested in is crafting spaces, together with others, like when Solvej invited me to join her to work at Gallery Wedding. It was a moment of rethinking and starting the space anew. What stories do we want to tell? Where do we find these stories?

I think that opening a new chapter gives people the possibility, not to spend too much time fighting against how you have been defined, but finding a way to define yourself. And that, to me, brings content to the epicentre. I love museums. I also love looking through their

collections. But I'm really interested in starting new collections. How do you do that? Of course, we have a big practice of looking at archives here (at SAVVY), but to me, the question is "Why not start a new archive? What would it possibly look like? What about the people who will see it a hundred years from now? What would they find in that space?" This massively informs my practice. I'm not interested in trying to understand the work of Michel Foucault in a new way, I'm instead interested in going to work with some other philosopher you don't necessarily talk about. It's really about opening new chapters, opening new spaces, looking at other spaces of thought. Curating is about opening epistemic spheres, places of knowledge, placing things in a way that would tell a story about a particular thing.

CURARE participant Now that SAVVY has been around for a while, how has your role as a curator in this space changed?

BSBN When one runs an institution, one doesn't have time anymore to do curatorial work, to be honest with you. The reason I'm constantly tired is that I try to find the time to do both. I still want to write, I still want to publish books, I don't want to just sit there and try to find mon-

ey, or go to dinners, meet different politicians etc. I want to engage in curatorial practice. If somebody else could go hustle for the money, I would be happy. My role has changed over the years, I'm now sleeping even less but you grow with the responsibility you have. You also get challenged by circumstances and you learn that all the things you intend to do are not necessarily right and there's a limit to how much you can fight. There are also times where you have to learn how to give up and not kill yourself.

In terms of the division of labour, it would be a myth to think that one can do the same on one's own. That's why you need a team. SAVVY, for example, is an incredible, imperfect machine. You have people who just think about the management, and they take on a lot of that work and they do it brilliantly. Others are in charge of communication, and they are doing it very well. We're working, constantly finding new mediums, constantly finding new ways of passing on the message. If you have little money, you have to be very creative, and we try to do that.

SHO Do you feel like you have a specific cosmology or something you build on

when making a show? Do you as a person see a connection between all these stations around the world that you have worked at?

BSBN I see a lot of things coming together somehow. In 2007 or so, I did an exhibition called Consumer Society, Consumed Society and our current exhibition at SAVVY (titled: RAUPENIMMERSATTISM) is building on that. Things come back as a kind of cycle. Maybe, what the underlying theme is for both these exhibitions, and honestly there's no easier way to put it, is a concern for humanity, a deep concern for human values. Who is the human? Who is allowed to be human? Why do we demonise? How can we live better in the world together? These are fundamental questions. It could easily sound very kitsch, or very megalomaniac. It is actually very simple and very basic. So, these are core issues I am interested in.

CURARE participant You spoke about your team, this imperfect machinery – I'm interested in how you see your role in protecting this and at the same time being open to influences? Also, how does sound come into this?

BSBN First of all, it's not up to me to protect the team. The team protects itself, we protect each other. I don't have the capacity to do it alone, I can't. They protect me, I protect some, some protect others, we try it in every way. There is deep care in the team. That doesn't mean we don't fight; we fight all the time. Don't misunderstand me. There is a sense of deep care that people exercise and again there's something bigger than our individual parts. I do worry sometimes that we stretch too much, but as much as we work, we also party. If it weren't for Corona, you would come in here during an opening at SAVVY and people who were working all night would then party like there is no tomorrow. I think there is joy in what we're doing. The challenges we face, we walk through them and move on.

You mentioned that every space is in constant flux. Spaces change based on our moods, the people in the space at a given time. I think every time you come to this place (Ed: the talk was held in SAVVY Contemporary on busy Reinickendorfer Straße, Berlin) it will be different, depending on the kind of cars that are passing by and so on and so forth.

In the history of SAVVY, we have been housed in different places. It started from a store front in Neukölln that was just seventy-five square metres. We then moved to a former power plant, a beautiful historical building from the mid-1920s with a completely different energy – and very cold in the winter. Really, everybody felt sick. We then moved to a former crematorium, which again had a different energy. We are constantly working with the space, the energy, the people, and the dead. Then we moved here (Reinickendorfer Straße 17), which is a former casino. I sat here yesterday morning at 9am and had a meeting with a sound artist. We had to do a sound project based on the sounds from outside. Within ten minutes, you could hear emergency cars, people passing by, screaming, you open the windows and hear people stepping on this metal thing on the footpath which also makes a particular sound. Every space has its own soundscape. The question is, “Do you want to erase that?” No. How do you work with it since you are constantly engaged in this? Even if you walk into this exhibition, it is loud. Is it unintentional? No, it's very intentional. It's actually the soundscape we want to have. Do we want to make pure spaces of sound? No, we want the sounds to overlap.

Emeka Ogboh said that when he came to Berlin for the first time from Lagos he couldn't sleep because it was too quiet. In Lagos, it's constantly very loud while here, a baby cries, everybody's looking at you. We're conscious of that element of sound. Of course, there are shows where we try to regulate sound differently. But for this exhibition about the noise of capitalism, this chaos of sounds is important.

CURARE participant In your opinion what is the relationship between art and activism?

BSBN The thing is, one needs to be very careful that one doesn't celebrate too fast, because there are some streets where it was decided that their names would change a few years ago and their names still haven't been changed. There's still a lot of work that has to be done. In an interview a few days ago I was asked about activism and art. My instinct was to reply that art and activism is a tautology, in my opinion, all art is activism in a way. The question is at what level. Every art is acting. Every art has agency. Every artist has agency. What are they advocating?

CURARE participant Does it also work the other way around? Is all activism art?

BSBN Why not? The question is: "Does every activist want to be an artist?" So, the intention is important, just as it is with art as well.

CURARE participant You mentioned that you see the exhibition as a way of telling a story, inviting artists and others to continue telling the story or telling it in another way. How much research do you share with the artist? Where does your work stop and where does the artist's work begin?

BSBN I don't want to influence the artist necessarily to do what I want. Most of the time you can work with people who are already working on the topics you are interested in. Sometimes, you think that it might be good to work with an artist because of their research process, or because of the way they tell stories. But what I value a lot are the long-term conversations that happen between artists and curators. Am I an artist? No, I'm not. Do I sign the work with the artist? No, I don't. But there are a lot of conversations that in-

form the artist's practice. And there are a lot of things that I do from the curatorial point of view that are informed by the conversations with the artists or with other people. It's not a clear-cut thing. The issue of authorship comes in there, which is very complicated. When I write something, I want my name to be there, very clearly. But the thing is, and it's important to acknowledge, that all the things you write are based on things you've read or heard from others, you are only the final person crafting it, crafting it your own way. This is also the case with artists and their works. There are artists I have been working with for 15 years, I often include them in exhibitions but not all the time.

There is an exhibition I'm working on now with Natasha Ginwala and a couple of others about the Indian Ocean. It's made up of different chapters, part of it is going to happen in Brisbane, in Australia, in France, in the Netherlands, in South Africa, in Berlin — in many different places around the world. There is an artist I was working with, in 2005, 2006, a Belgian painter, actually, a draughtsman. A brilliant artist. I knew that if I was working on the topic of the sea if there was one person to work with it was going to be that guy. Our conversation started fifteen years ago, and this is happening now. I am interested



in those conversations, and I think this is also something we cultivate a lot here in SAVVY. If you can find the time to talk a lot with an artist, then things develop from that. But of course, there are also curators who tell the artists, "I want you to do that, do that, and it has to be this way." I hope I'm not that kind.

There are certain artists who you work with, and you know that they could do brilliant performances, if only they had the chance. Sometimes they don't even know that, but because you're in conversation with them you can see that they could be brilliant performers. So, you invite them to do performances for a show. They will tell you, "No, I don't do performances, that's not me."—"Well, maybe there's something in this for you, would you be interested in it?" And then they go there and give a brilliant performance that many people who call themselves performance artists cannot do.

SHO You have a lot of poetic gifts, a really admirable flow of writing and everyone who edits your texts can really feel that. For all humans who want to write, is there any advice that comes to mind that you would like to share?



Bonaventure I think that people who really write for a living are the ones who should answer that. I stopped writing for somebody a very long time ago. Very rarely, I still do it. People often ask me to write something, but I will only write it, if it is something that I've always wanted to write about, that I've been thinking about. It's very difficult to start from scratch. And I'm also very slow, I take my time.

A few days ago, a short version of a text I wrote was published in Frieze magazine. It was a bit over a thousand and something words, and it was part of a longer text of about eight thousand five hundred words, which I wrote for no particular reason. I didn't write it, because it had to be published or because somebody wanted the text, but because I thought I had to write it. I'm not disciplined when I'm writing for other people, but I'm disciplined when I'm writing for myself. It must come from the heart. I still write quite a lot. I like writing about music. During the lockdown, I started a diary. It was about my records, just about the things I was listening to at the time. All of a sudden, we all had to stay home.

All of a sudden, I had a lot of time on my hands. I wondered what I should do and since I like listening to music, I would listen to a record, then write about it. It ranged from 500 or 300 words to 2000 words. Sometimes it was a proper essay but interestingly, it became a way of dealing with what was happening at the time, the virus and people dying, the killing of George Floyd, the crisis, some beautiful moments here and there. So, it just became a way of venting, releasing all this pressure.

Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung is a curator and author, holding a PhD in biotechnology. Ndikung is professor for the MA programme Spatial Strategies at the Weißensee School of Art, Berlin, and co-editor and author of numerous publications on aspects of cultural criticism and critical exhibition theory. Ndikung is also artistic director of the Dutch exhibition Sonsbeek 20-24 and the 13th Rencontres de Bamako 2021, a biennial of African photography in Mali. He was curator at large of documenta 14 in Athens and Kassel, and guest curator of Dak'Art – Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain 2018 in Dakar, Senegal. Since 2009, he has been managing director and artistic director of SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin. For his work there, Ndikung received the Order of Merit of the State of Berlin in October 2020. In January 2023 Ndikung will take up his position as the new director at Haus der Kulturen der Welt.

ruangrupa

Parasitic Curating and Rotating Roles



RUANGRUPA

DOCUMENTA FIFTEEN

STREET
APPROACH
LOCAL
COLLECTIVES
+ NETWORKS

ROTATING
ROLES

POWER

MONU-
MENT

COLLEC-
TIVE
CURATING



EXCHANGING
STORIES

contextual
knowledge

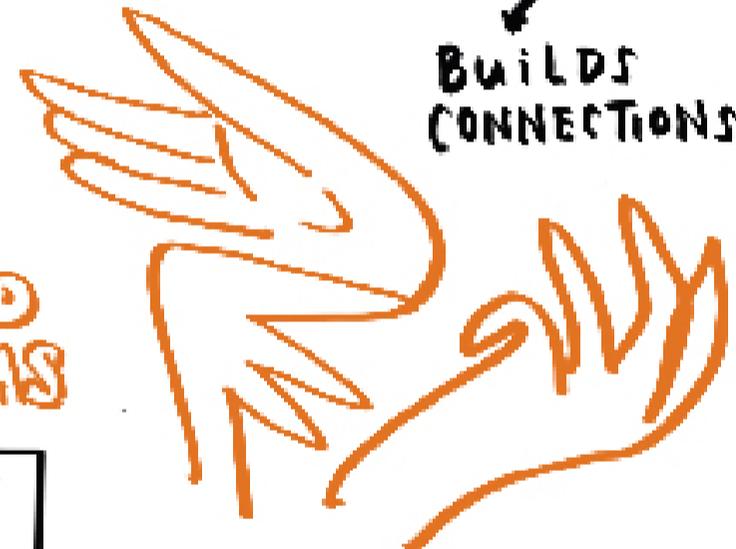
Values

BUILDS
CONNECTIONS



Move
back+forth

SPACE to ID
than EAS



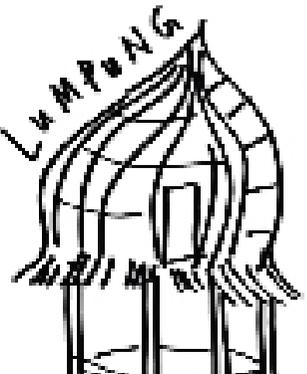
Friends?

Relate
the artist
to the
institution

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METHODS



How
do we
remember
things?
- NARRA-
TION of
HERI-
TAGE

"Something really problematic with curating exhibitions or big events in general, is how you extract things, you pull out all the resources and then divide it in a definitive time and space and call it an exhibition."

ruangrupa, CURARE 2021

Solvej Helweg Ovesen: We're happy to have you with us here today. ruangrupa is an interdisciplinary artist collective based in Jakarta with over two decades of experience in finding the liminal space for art inside intense political situations. We have two out of the ten members of ruangrupa with us today, Ade Darmawan and Iswanto Hartono who have both been part of the collective for over 10 years. You're curating documenta 15 together in 2022.

movement from the young generation. We were part of this movement coming from the side of art and culture. And now, I have just arrived from Sukabumi, which is about three hours away from Jakarta. Before that, I was constantly travelling back and forth working, but also trying to live there in the countryside, in the village doing some farming and so on. I would spend one week there, one week in Jakarta and was starting to get this need to work more. I can't just work on one thing – I think that's my curse.

Ade Darmawan: Hello, I'm one of the co-founders of ruangrupa. It all started when we were in art school in Jakarta, in the mid-1990s – in 1995. I've known some of the members of the collective for 25 years. I was born and grew up in Jakarta and then studied printmaking at the art school in Yogyakarta. After that, I went to the Rijksakademie in the Netherlands from 1998 to 2000 and then I went back to Jakarta and set up ruangrupa together with six other friends.

Iswanto Hartono: Hello, I'm Iswanto Hartono, I joined ruangrupa around 2008. I studied architecture in New Delhi, India and joined ruangrupa right after my studies. There are two architects in the collective. We have a lot of fun working together, it's more enjoyable being together as a big family, the ruangrupa extended family! There is a group of us who work together continuously but we have a bigger family as well, whom we work with on different projects.

During that time, after 1998, our military leader had just stepped down after thirty-one years of a strong military regime. In the mid-1990s, after the end of his regime, there was a big

Formal Informality

Ade: First of all, I would like to talk about time which is very important in our collective practice. In many cases, time is not there for us. Time allows the creation of trust; of understanding misunderstanding. Spending a lot of time in the same space together has created a strong bond between us. When we met in the '90s we started by criticising power and the establishment. Power is also one of the factors that we constantly question in a lot of different ways. We know that we also live within this power structure, we experience it in our daily life. Curating is also a product of that relationship. We do organic curating. It is really about formality and informality.

Everyone in the group actually has a lot of skills, and the idea of the model of ruangrupa is that everyone has rotating roles, no-one is bound to only one role. But in order for this to work, the requirement is that everyone works interdisciplinary or masters multiple disciplines in order to be able to perform all the different roles. Then endurance is also important — because you have to move on different levels much more than when everyone has their one assigned role. It's a combination of

all that. We move a lot and after 20 years, we do this almost instinctively — deciding who is going to be in front, who is going to be speaking, who would be good at something, and who should be in the background listening. We respect individual abilities, and we know each other individually very well. We know who we want to work with in each situation. We like to work with people who have a different perspective to us. There's a lot of back and forth between individual practice and collective practice.

When people ask, how can you survive working together for so many years, it's very hard to answer. One of the reasons that this works, is that ruangrupa is not the only thing we do. For example, I have my own job, I teach, I work on my artistic works and practice, I do things individually as well, and then I also do other projects with other folks. Iswanto as well, he has his architectural office. ruangrupa is never our main thing, actually. And it's the same for the others, Indra Ameng for example is a manager of bands. It's very healthy. I think a collective practice is healthier when everyone

is bringing their own resources rather than thinking collectively being the main resource. That's what we talk about with our lumbung idea (lumbung means collective rice barn or storage in Indonesian) as a concept of gathering knowledge, artists and people for documenta. Everyone has their own resources and they put it in the surplus, in lumbung, and then we decide what happens collectively. There is a lot of back and forth involved, you have a collective of formal informality. There's a lot of crazy stuff, chaos. I would say that a collective method of practice is disorganised and inefficient. That's why people also invented a new individuality because they saw that things would take very long to happen. But it's also richer, more beautiful. It's not efficient, but we don't go for efficiency. I think efficiency was also invented by the modern capitalistic system — we have to be efficient; we always have to be productive. That's not our model.

When it comes to decision making, for example, we never really vote. Our process is actually an extension of our tradition of hanging out. We have a living room in the house which we use as a place to gather and this is where everyone exchanges stories from individual

experiences — and by bringing these stories, ideas develop. For me art making is not private, it's very open, very visible. It's something that can be destructive as well.

I was very surprised when I went to the Rijksakademie that everyone was working alone, spending all their time in their own studios. So, this living room was actually the opposite of that. After many years, these gatherings became formal and we introduced the lumbung, that's one word that is still alive in our cosmology, we know what it is in our bodies, it lives in our bodies.

Collective Dynamics

CURARE participant: Since you were friends in the first place, your dynamics are very different to the usual setup of collectives. For example, in our collective at Bärenzwinger we are together because of our work in the communal galleries. When we met each other for the first time we already knew we were going to work together. I think that's a very different dynamic. I wanted to ask, „What in your opinion is your dynamics within ruangrupa? Is it different from your relationship with the other groups you work with?“

Ade: Yeah, it is different. Even within ruangrupa itself, there are nine or ten friends who are always in the picture, they are the ones also working for documenta. But we don't have a membership, so there is a lot of coming and going. We also work with a lot of much younger artists and curators and people from other disciplines — people who may have many different visions, different politics and we have to work with them differently as well. So, it's less organic, less natural than when you start from being friends, because the motivation is different, and this is where the personal stories also come in.

This is similar to an out-of-body experience, exchanging stories is really part of the way we work. It's a method to get to know each other but also a way to understand, to put things in context. Many things are selective but at the same time reductive. A theme, for example, might be created through stories, and through conversations that happen in the livingroom, in other spaces. These then build connections that lead to a theme for a project.

Education is one place where this can work. And we have one programme called Speculative Collective. When a group of people who don't know each other come together, and then start to learn from, and teach each other what they know, that's a method of learning. A group of people can actually learn about something, even when none of the members has that knowledge. We tried those methods a few times. Can we develop a collective sense of understanding when we don't know each other? Can we build trust without meeting each other first? I think in our generation physical contact is very important. But we can also learn from the hacker community for example, who have never met each other, but they work together. So, there are different models of how people can come together and work together.



Local to Local

SHO: In your presentation about your artistic directorship of documenta, you emphasised that things will happen going in and out of Kassel. I was wondering how the beginning has been, because you also speak a lot about a locality in your approach to generating content. I've lived in Kassel, and I know what documenta means to all these people in Kassel and what it's like to be a foreigner there. They've been educated in a particular way through the years since documenta started in 1955. You have this amazing awareness, and you propose a way of working that is coming from local content or local spaces and you bring the lumbung idea to Kassel. You are not coming from the discourse that is looking for the old European idea of quality in art, which is connected to a form of perfection and another kind of authorship connected to the artist. When you're talking about an organic process and locality, what is your experience so far in setting up and working in Kassel? I know it's been impossible, because of Corona, but on

the other hand, you have had an international connection with the other communities. Maybe you have some rituals or practices from your space in Jakarta that you can share with us? I was wondering, how did you include the other communities? How do you open up to new communities?

Iswanto: Before answering your question, what I didn't say before, is that in my experience, what has made us survive for more than 20 years, is that our practice is embedded in the connection with space, with time and with the context of the city. Especially in the place where we live, our work is very connected to the political and the social. What's also very important to us is how the space itself creates an environment around it. Jakarta, this very complex city, is where we really have a space to share ideas and just be together. Apart from doing work, being together, just hanging out as friends is very precious for us.

Now coming to Kassel, I remember that since the early days before we were even appointed as the directors of documenta, we would discuss the context, the risks that came with it as well and the challenges, it's very important to

talk about these. We were aware as well that one of the criticisms of us, especially from the side of the European directors, was that we would land in Kassel as a UFO and then just go after 100 days. But if you look back even 15 years ago, we always tried hard and put a lot of emphasis on how works were presented and being in close contact with Kassel's ecosystems. This is embedded in how we work. In Kassel, when we were invited, we built on what we had already gone through, reviewing what we had worked on in the past. We established what we called the ruruhaus, which was similar to what we had done in the past but within a different context. Reza Afisina and I are here in Kassel working, trying to approach Kassel's ecosystems, inviting people to meet, starting discussions — it's more like a street approach, it's about being there and experiencing the streets without any formal structure. Reza is very good at that, going out in the street and then meeting anyone who is around.

I was thinking that when documenta had just one artistic director, it must have been very hard for them to go out and meet people on the street every day, it would be taking up all

their time. We are working collectively; we are a large group of people so we can always split the tasks between us. We really feel like one, helping and supporting each other. We also approach local artist collectives here (in Kassel), we are trying to build a relationship with all the local members of the team, the artists we work with and other partners. We are trying to create a thread between Kassel and the larger documenta 15 network. A lot also came from our own network which we've built during these twenty years of existence, we always keep in touch with each other.

Lumbung is a way of working!

Ade: Lumbung is not really a theme. There's no theme at the centre here, everything around it will react to it or illustrate it. Lumbung refers to a way of working. This is also something that we're trying to bring into our practice on this journey. We are trying not to see documenta 2022 as the end of it, but are thinking of ways to go beyond that. The way we work is very physical and also very connected to space. And that's how our sensory coworking functions. Maybe one can call it research,

just being there, listening and experiencing what is happening in a space. For us, this is very important. We feel that this is something that we have to take care of, the people who live there, their feelings and everything. It's only possible to understand all that by being there, opening up, with all the risk that goes with it, the conversations, the expectations, the understandings and misunderstandings. We don't want this journey to be only extractive, but we are trying to think about what resources, energy and knowledge can cycle back to each locality. That's something really problematic with curating exhibitions or big events in general, you extract things, you pull out all the resources and then divide it in a definitive time and space and call it an exhibition. Can we think beyond that? Can we think beyond the duration of an exhibition? What about the artists, what about everyone who worked there, what about the place?

CURARE participant: I found it very interesting when you were talking about the different durations of an exhibition, how it can look into the future, but also this idea of extracting and how to find a way to source local resources. I was wondering how you approach this, are you

looking back at the past or is it something very much in the present? Working at Bärenzwinger we face these two challenges, there is a certain history of the place and people tend to think we should do exhibitions related to this history. But perhaps there is something new that you might want to bring to it and think about what an emblem of the city could be, or, „What is a place through which the city is representing itself?“ I was wondering about those two different ways of looking at a place.

Ade: Iswanto and Reza came to Kassel last July (2020) both with their families, so they really moved there. What is very important for us are the stories that develop from people, the small narrations that can give more meaning to the space and inform how we are reading it. Usually, many surprises come up. In Indonesia, we have actually done a lot of projects in public spaces about how people dream. It's pretty anarchist in a way because the history of the space is usually written in a very top-down way, the state usually builds the narration about certain places or monuments. But what about the bodily experience, the small stories from the people? It's inter-

esting to counter that mainstream, top-down, state control of memories. Nowadays also corporations control how we should remember things. But what if we ask people, „What is heritage? What do people want to keep and preserve?“

Iswanto: Most members of ruangrupa grew up during the era of the New Order regime in Indonesia and in their authoritarian educational system, which has had a great influence on us and on our work, being critically responsive to the politics full of corruption, nepotism, collusions, and oppressive military power.

Going into the discussion about monuments, we did not grow up in an area surrounded by, let's say, all the glorious monuments of the Dutch. We live in an area that is filled with all the new monuments, brought about by a fascist regime. These do not create a stimulating visual experience and are not connected to any memories. Living in a country with a repressive regime means that anything we do has had to start from the streets. Our memories and the way we grew up usually play an important role in the way we approach the topics we work with.

SHO: Iswanto and Ade, thank you very much for leading us through all these

questions. Both in your approach to other institutions and regarding the topic of monuments, you refer to hegemonic stories and hegemonic forces. You often use the word hijacking — hijacking other institutions or involving a community, such as a football club, in the process of generating knowledge and content in Kassel. I was wondering — could you say something about what it means for you to hijack an institution today? I know exactly how documenta is structured hierarchically and I know the impossibility of getting the logistics and power structures to really meet. Even communication can be difficult sometimes. What could be strategies of hijacking today for ruangrupa?

Ade: I think we started by expanding the invitation we got from documenta. This is not just the work of ruangrupa, this hijacking should be a collective hijacking. I think many people are very anxious about the result, and I know that a lot of collectives have a different cosmology, a different way of producing art, a different way of making the art public, attempting, struggling within the context. To build this you need time – we see this as a journey, not as something that will end with documenta. I will be much more interested in what will

happen after documenta, after we bring all those different super interesting models and practices from different parts of the world to Kassel, all with similar values. What can we learn from each other? It will be interesting to see how we can grow through this process. We plant something in the bigger system. We also learn a lot from the process. We say lumbung is not a theme, it's actually a way of working that comes with certain values and we try to make as much as we can with these values. It took some time for everyone in the team to understand the practice. As curators we meet individually and collectively, we always work this way, we bring a certain approach, subjects, concerns, that we would like to learn and address and then discuss, letting the others react to it.

We have been working with education, mediation, and publications since the beginning, not as something that jumps in after the exhibition, but rather as something that acts as a central element. With communication, we try not to do press releases where the organisers are telling the press what to say or what to write. Instead, we do what we call Warung Kopi, which are informal conversations in a relaxed setting; and so we hang out with

the journalists who come from many parts of the world. For them, it's also very exciting, because they've never done something like that before, meeting other journalists from different contexts. So we create conversations rather than telling the journalists what to write.

Another part of our programme for documenta is lumbung calling, a series of talks (seven series) with different guests, which happens once a month. We are also doing something that we call Meydan through which we create an exchange with the public, activating different spaces, programmes or projects coming from different localities. Lumbung members will have an assembly every three months and they are also working within different working groups thinking about economy, land, publications, website and so on. We bring artists together in a group, so that they can collaborate if they want, share their ideas, troubles, needs, and resources. For example, someone can have their own project, but also assist another artist on something. Many big events or exhibitions are actually very disconnected. This relationship between artists, producers, organisers is often super problematic, right?

So, we chose to erase the logic of the commission — that one commissions an artist. As there is no theme, we do not try to illustrate the theme. We are interested in who would like to mutually work with us with the working values we follow. What we research is actually how the artists work, how they work in their own ecosystem, how they work with others and so on. We have a lot of back and forth, we often have two or three conversations with artists and collectives trying to see how they work, but the decision should be mutual. It's not about "You are invited, we are going to send you an invitation". It is a mutual decision. It needs to be interesting for them in the long run. So we follow a different process. Everyone is worried about whether there is going to be an exhibition, whether there is going to be art in it. I'm not really worried about that, but there's going to be many artworks to show of course. This journey is more interesting though.

SHO: Iswanto and Ade, thank you so much for your openness, for sharing your time with us, for thinking with us and thank you, everyone, for participating, for the great questions and for sharing. Thank you to the rest of ruangrupa. Thank you.

ruangrupa is a collective founded in 2000 and based in Jakarta, Indonesia. They are currently the artistic directors of documenta 15 (2022). As a non-profit organisation, ruangrupa promotes artistic ideas within urban and cultural contexts through the involvement of artists and other disciplines such as social sciences, politics, technology or media, so as to open up critical reflections and perspectives on contemporary urban problems in Indonesia. ruangrupa's work is based on a holistic social, spatial and personal practice that is strongly rooted in Indonesian culture, where friendship, solidarity and community are of central importance. ruangrupa runs an art space in the south of Jakarta. The collective has participated in numerous collaborative projects and exhibitions, including: the Gwangju Biennial (2002 and 2018); Istanbul Biennial (2005); Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (Brisbane, 2012); Singapore Biennial (2011); São Paulo Biennial (2014); Aichi Triennial (Nagoya, 2016); and Cosmopolis at the Centre Pompidou (Paris, 2017). 2016 saw ruangrupa curate transACTION: Sonsbeek 2016 in Arnhem, the Netherlands. In 2018, the collective (together with Serrum and Grafis Huru Hara, two other Jakarta-based collectives) founded GUDSKUL, an education and networking project for creatives based on collaborative work. At documenta 14, ruangrupa was involved with its Internet radio as a partner in the decentralised radio project "Every Time an Ear di Soun", which connected eight radio stations worldwide.

Raqs Media
Collective
Practising
Collectivity:
What is possible
and not yet
forbidden?



Art :
Re-
Enchant-
ment of
the
World

RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE

WALK IN THE SHIFTING TIME HORIZON

FROM SUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE TO SPACE

Proposal

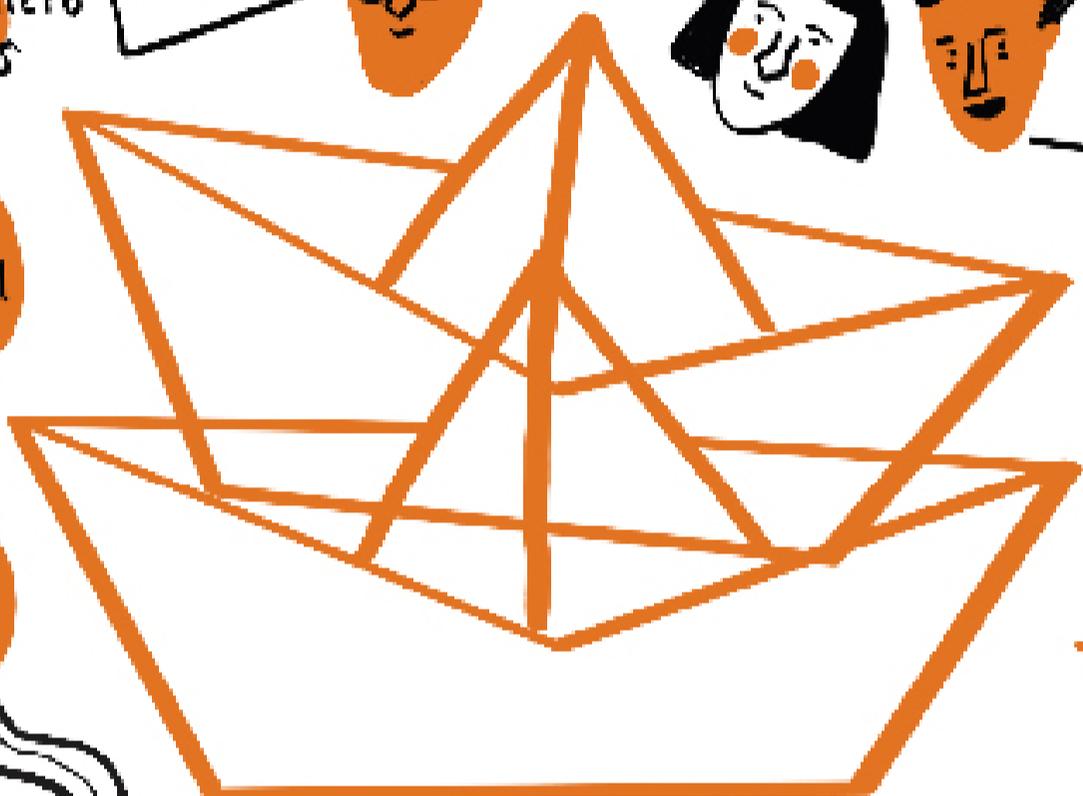
Many forms of Cooperations

offline
online

Art: Re-Enchantment of the World

built micro milieus

blur artistic & curatorial milieu



GEOMETRY OF RAQS CREATING NEW SPACES

← SHAPES

NOT NUMBERS BUT RELATIONSHIPS

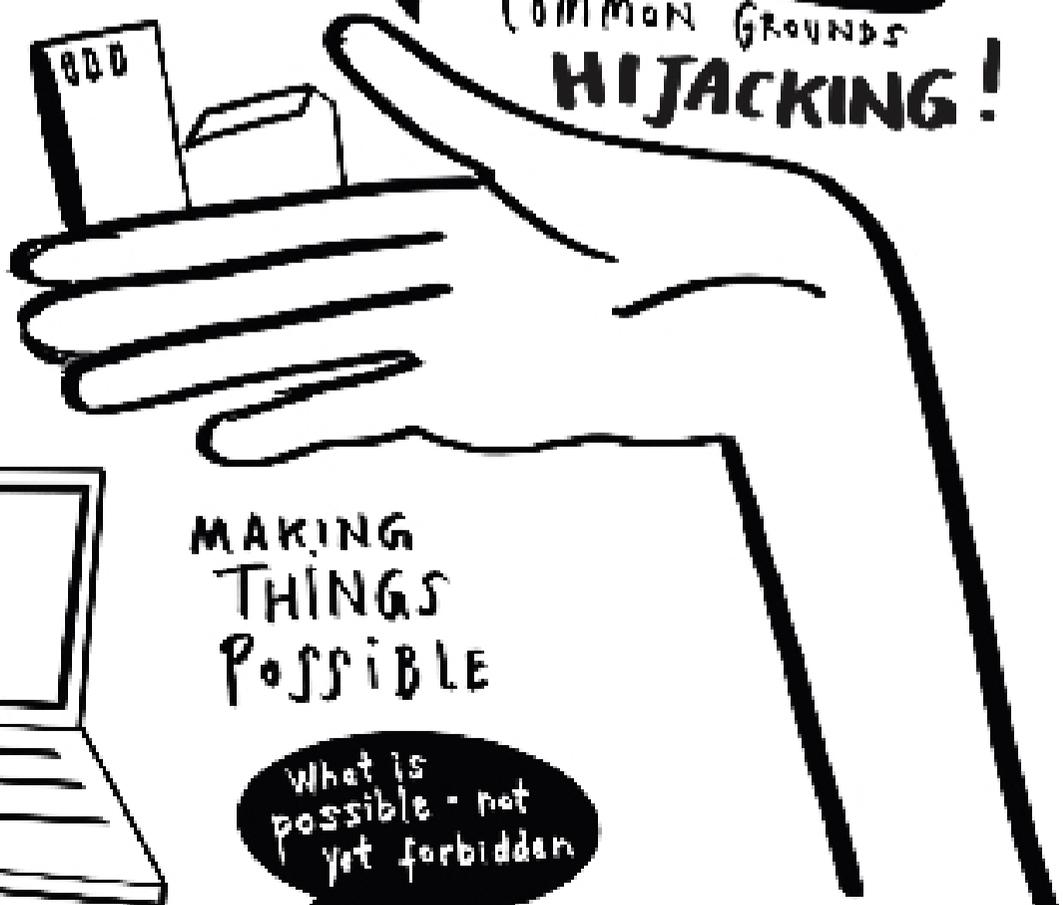
SOURCES

a reservoir of memories

INVITING

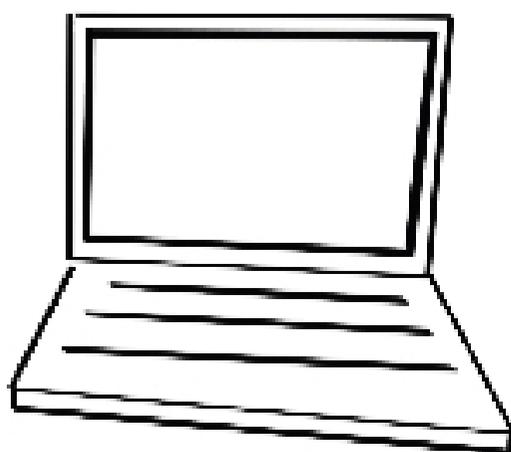
ABANDONED PLACES
COMMON GROUNDS
HIJACKING!

SETTING the SCENE



MAKING THINGS POSSIBLE

What is possible - not yet forbidden



Rags Media Collective (Jeebesh Bagchi): It's a long journey: from the beginning of Rags in 1992 to an intensification of practice and milieu with us setting up Sarai in 2000, to today. As a collective, we start on specific threads by generating an axial moment or theme, or by drawing in a source, and then we try to think of the various "shifts" that this produces. One of the questions that has occupied us since our inception is that of the "arena". We are interested in looking within the "arena" at infrastructures and relationships that bring people together, as well as the knowledge, sentiments, thresholds, and affects that are produced from it. Two more concepts important to us are what we call "minor practices" and "infra-practices". "Minor practices" are practices that keep "infra-practices" in operation, that transform infrastructures.

Rags Media Collective (Shuddhabrata Sengupta): We were always very interested in thinking about ways of setting the stage for actions, for people to gather, for things to happen, what Jeebesh calls the "arena". For us, this was a process that occupied a lot of our attention from 1998 onwards. There was a certain transformation going on in India at the time; people were finding new modes of talking to each

other, the economy was changing, new technologies were being introduced, new media communication technologies became present, etc. Together with two other theorists, Ravi Vasudevan, a cinema historian, and Ravi Sundaram, a historian specialising in popular technologies in the urban environment, we formed a space, a programme and an expanding cluster of relationships that we called Sarai. The Sarai programme[1] at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies was both a platform where different kinds of practice, intellectual work and research could meet, but also a place for making things. It's a space for reflection, for production, for learning, for asking questions and for making.

For us, the most important part of being in a collective, and this goes back to when we started after our film school days, is not numbers but relationships. We have written an essay, called "Additions, Subtractions: On Collectives and Collectivity" [2], which talks about collectivity as a mode of being in a collective. We claim that there's an important distinction between collectivity and geometry. You can take any number of people, any accumulation – but this doesn't in itself produce a sense of being a collective. What differentiates one

accumulation from another is the evolving shape of the gathering. For us in Raqs, this is what we call the triangulation between the three of us, between our three interests, our three individual, very different lives and curiosities that then intersect with other “ships”. The geometry of Raqs is in flux and it is also in interaction with many other geometries, creating new spaces, creating new contexts for being, creating new contexts for making things happen. I think this is the first distinction that we must understand when we talk about collective curating. It’s not just about putting people in a room together and asking them to curate, it’s about trying to find a geometry of thought, a way of being and expressing together.

Sarai was a geometry box, it was a toolkit for making different geometries. One of the things we did was institute a set of independent fellowships. By the end, there were more than 600 fellowships that occupied many different areas of practice, ranging from technology to theatre, to dance, to culture, to contemporary art, to historical research, to archiving. And it was the conversation between these practices that created a certain atmosphere and energy that produced a milieu. We also had

a publication programme that produced The Sarai Readers ^[3]. The final Sarai Reader, Sarai Reader 09^[4], was a book that became an exhibition and an exhibition that was also a kind of publication.

There was always an ongoing conversation through online gatherings. In a sense this is what we are all doing today, because we have offline constraints, we have online possibilities. In the early 2000s, there was an interesting inversion of this, there were online constraints and offline possibilities. By online constraints, I mean that the Internet was very new, broadband was very slow, attention spans were different and people were not used to the idea of meeting and interacting in virtual space. So Sarai deliberately created a conversation exploring what it meant to be online between these new technologies, as well as finding constant, intensive, frequent possibilities for physical interaction. We always had this ambidextrous practice between online gatherings and offline intensification, and it produced many possibilities. We did labs in working-class communities, publication programmes, we worked with language and with different forms of practice that became artistic ones. Many of the contemporary art

forms that we see in South Asia today were in some ways seeded during that period. At the time, they were not necessarily recognised as art or as curatorial practice. We ourselves were ambivalent about the fact that we were considered to be artists. We came into being artists through that process. We also did not know then that much of what we were doing had curatorial implications. This process of finding energies, gathering people, creating the context for collaboration, making things possible and then nurturing them over time, we now understand is connected to curating.

Jeebesh: One of the things that we understood and developed back then, and which is now becoming increasingly important for us, is the idea of the perennial presence of each other, the importance of that creative environment where people can be present for sustained periods of time. How does the moment of intensification occur? What type of conditions do you create at the moment of intensification? Perennial presence requires a very light structure, one that anybody might participate in with a basic Internet connection. It could appear simply as a link that allows one to look at and be with others. At Sarai we set up a simple protocol: if you were a fellow of Sarai,

we would be working with you, we would be in conversation with you, and we would also bring you together with the other fellows of Sarai.

We were part of an experiment in building forms of co-presence; there is not one kind of co-presence but many, and you just need to set up the conditions for that co-presence to occur. I remember one of the fellows, now a well-known artist, asked: “What are we supposed to produce?” And I had said: “Come here and spend time with each other, and production is not mandatory, just enjoy being an artist. One can surely have six weeks of being an artist without producing!” I think this still haunts his practice. This comes from the idea that an artist is more than someone who only just produces works. It is something that has carried on in our discussions, and in environments, which we have gathered. We did an experiment, for instance, in 2012-13 in Delhi/Gurugram, where we created an exhibition process involving a hundred artists over nine months, which opened *empty*^[5]. As in, the public was invited to a space without works, but there was one caveat — every artist had given a proposal of what they would do over the months in the space, and these

proposals were available in the space for all to read. Reading each other's proposals, we would see how works developed their own rhythm and grew in a cooperative way. It was chaotic and anarchic, and it produced exciting micro-models of doing, both curatorial and artistic work. When the role of the curator and the artist gets blurred, micro-climates are fostered.

Shuddhabrata: One of the next things we did was to produce an exhibition in Delhi called **INSERT2014** ^[6], which was an insertion into the contemporary cultural life of the city. One of the propositions that we made was, that part of being connected to the collective life of the city is also discovering what the city makes possible or what is latent. We researched spaces that were either unbuilt, abandoned or disused in Delhi and tried to list them in terms of what possibilities could emerge from them. This list of spaces was then handed over to a group of invited artists, intellectuals, architects, writers and they were asked to imagine, what is the possible life or afterlife they could see there — the imagined life of these spaces? It was a way of saying: “We live in this city which is full of possibilities, there are all these spaces that are actually

open to reinvention and reuse if they were to be occupied by artistic presence, if they were to be inhabited by the life of culture and imagination.” And this process produced a very interesting constellation of an imagined but very real city, because these were not fantastical spaces, they were present in the city and the curatorial process consisted in making them manifest. We called it “Common Ground”, the idea being that their discovery and the entrance of the artistic presence into these common grounds actually makes them part of the imaginative commons of the city.

If we are making an exhibition in the city where we are inviting artists from different parts of the world, we are also inviting the city to discover a part of itself through the research, presence and intervention of artists in how they propose and how they reimagine the city's structure. You have to work with available resources, especially in societies where infrastructure is not a given, where everything is not laid out for you, as it is in South Asia, as it is in a city like Delhi. This was something that we encouraged in Sarai, not to romanticise lo-fi, but instead to never think in terms of impossibilities. It's very easy in many cultural contexts, whether because of resources or

because of censorship or because of other constraints, for artists and curators to quickly turn to the question of the lament, of what is not possible. So we decided to do this the other way around, let's always think in terms of what is possible. Many of the things that are possible are not yet forbidden, and what is not yet forbidden is a space of openness where you can push the frontiers of what culture is, what contemporary art is, what intellectual life is, what can be thought and spoken and said in a city.

Jeebesh: I will briefly touch on the idea of the “infra”, which I initially referred to as “infra-practices”. In 2015 we were invited to curate the eleventh **Shanghai Biennale** ^[7], and in a biennale you have a carte blanche, to a certain extent, to set up your own team. There are constraints, but the part that is great fun is that you set up a team and create a group of people who will work with you and who will be in conversation with you. So, we asked ourselves, “What exactly is curatorial authorship?” In order to fully understand authorship, you have to first understand the conversation that any authorship needs to be part of. To engage with this, we invented the idea of “infra-curatorial”. We invited seven people, all of whom

were engaged in different forms of curatorial practices, and all of them took our invitation and wager to completely new levels. We outlined the space and shared ‘sources’ that we were thinking with, as well as conversational annotations and materials from the time spent walking through Shanghai. In the exhibition, each infra-curator had an authorial signature, but it also extended as a co-authorial tendency with us. This doubling of the curatorial creates an intense thicket, where there are certain consistencies, currents, distinctions, demarcations, and, at the same time, densities emerge. The curatorial contains and expresses its own dissonances and inconsistencies. Certain artistic works emerged which could not have happened otherwise. These kinds of possibilities are what “infra” allows us to unravel. It's that specific conversation, the thread that somebody amplifies in a certain kind of historical specificity, a certain kind of geographical intensity that cannot be framed otherwise within the larger play. Here it is not the individual artist who is doing the staging, it is a certain curatorial density that is staging a whole scenario from different zones. In connection to this, also within the Biennale, we did an experiment called the Theory Opera. How do you speak about theory? That's



a question that always comes up in contemporary art. You have the exhibition and the seminar – the classic contemporary art separation. The seminar is where logos speak, the exhibition is where affect comes in. And this is the delusion, this separation that has become the formula. It didn't start as a binary, but it has become so. Through our Theory Opera, we wanted to test this partition.

CURARE participant: I was just wondering if you could talk a bit more about the role sources play in your work.

Shuddhabrata: I think, just to complicate the question, sources enable an interesting set of manoeuvres. It's a bit like, if you're a farmer and you're throwing your seeds in different places and you're gathering your seeds from different plants, there's a kind of give and take between your environment, you and time. Sources actually allow you to completely transform an itinerary. They allow you to create a map that allows you to create a journey. At the Shanghai Biennale, sources became very interesting for us. They ranged from a science fiction novel written in China called *The Three-Body Problem*^[8] – we were a three-body problem, the Raqs Media Collective – to

a film set in 1970's Bengal called "Reasons, Arguments and Stories". These seemed to suggest a certain set of moves that one can make with art, with literature, with culture or with anything you create, you make arguments and tell stories. This method of actually finding different works or different moments, which become points of reference, points of departure, things to argue with, things to quarrel with, things to fall in love with, is a different kind of collectivity. It's not a collectivity of people, but it's a collectivity of points of reference and points of departure. We did the same thing with the show at *MACBA*^[9], and in a sense, even approached the curation of the *Yokohama Triennial*^[10] in a similar way. When you invite other people to your table, when you lay out these sources, then they produce many different combinatorial possibilities. It allows you to go beyond the simple one-line statement and it is that simple one-line statement, which is often the bone of contention. It's impossible then for the censor to ask, what is this about? What are you doing? You could always throw in another source and change the contours of that conversation. That's why a diversity of sources helps to keep a conversation open-ended. Curatorially we found this method to be adventurous as well as useful.

Jeebesh: Sources allow a certain movement in cultural and intellectual life that un-stills dominant barriers. We can move from a 15th-century text to an early 20th-century text; I can move to an image from the 16th century and not bother about whether it's contemporary or not, because the idea of knowledge formation, the idea of how knowledge is produced, is open-ended. We try to open up the field from which today's knowledge is to be built. Another question is: "How do you deal with the hierarchy of knowledge?" In Yokohama, we learned about a dockworker, a precarious dockworker, who in a conversation with an anthropologist over a period of a few years was talking about his voracious reading and making sense of the world, and he was just brilliant. And then we placed him, a daily wager rethinking the world through his voracious reading, next to a Nobel laureate, and next to a literary theorist from Harvard. We drew from this non-rivalrous gathering the sensibility of a luminous care of friendship. What it does is, it is producing a new language, a new intellectual genealogy of care, producing new topographies, not necessarily arising from a specific space or kind of thinking. Present hierarchies become decentred. This becomes the ground on which we build

relationships with artists and the basis for curatorial moments. It is not your knowledge, it is not your ability to mobilise certain things, it is about developing something together through the things we have in common, but also along with what both of us are ignorant about. It is something we have in common, but we don't know all its dimensions, and it is as alien or as complex to me as it is to you. It is that movement between ignorance, non-mastery, and non-hierarchy. The worker's ruminations are not a rival to the Nobel laureate's treatise. Slowly, we've come to understand that infra-curatorial moves that we had been making were dependent, in a way, on which sources could be navigated and how they are brought and read together. I am learning the source by your reading and you are learning the source from my reading. That's what we call the self-didactic or the autodidactic process of the curatorial. Both of us are learning together about a very complex question that none of us had encountered before. That is why new collectives are formed. And exhibitions are temporary collectives. Together, we find collectivities that we didn't anticipate before. And that's what links us, our mutual exploration of something that is intangible at one level and tangible at another.

CURARE participant: The sources were chosen between the artists and the curators?

Jeebesh: What happens is that, in the process of making an exhibition, artists are continuously gathering, and some artists become part of your conversation. It is an entanglement. We are interested in procedures, and also a heterogeneity and a multiplicity of sources. Instead of thematic unity, we try to proliferate and build a ground of sources for the contemporary. It's about the building of contemporary sources of culture, sources of intellectual life, and thinking the contemporary by multiplying, contaminating, and building together. This is a process that may start in an institutional context, move into a non-institutional context, and go wherever conversational micro-environments are produced. It is the confidence of micro-environments that fosters new confidence in sources.

Ioli Tzanetaki: Thank you for taking us through this journey with you. How have you dealt with conflict throughout your practice? When working together for so many years and with people outside your collective, it is inevitable that

conflict arises. But conflict can also be positive, it can actually help you progress the conversation.

Jeebesh: Conflict is too big a word. We call it disagreements, because in the curatorial-artistic environment, there are disagreements and then there are conflicts of scale. I use the word 'scale', because the scale of an idea or the scale of a conversation are often not available before the conversation. If a conversation starts, I don't know the scale to which the conversation can go, and the person I'm having the conversation with, doesn't know this either. There is a misrecognition of scale sometimes. We know that we have to be open to unpredictability and a potential loss of control. You often find yourself in unpredictable environments, and sometimes that can give rise to very public quarrels. This has happened between us, and on occasion with other artists, though that has been very rare. Another reason a disagreement can arise is because of care for a work. Sometimes what happens is that one is being too fastidious, both in their curatorial and in their artistic work. Our solution to this is that we keep the ends un-concluded – there is no end that is fixed from the beginning. But exhibitions, as

you know, are fixed entities, books are fixed entities, so sometimes choices are made and sometimes artists may feel they have not been heard. What we do in situations like that is to move to new terrain. We don't stay with the problem in the same terrain, so that the articulation of the problem enriches all of us. I think that, usually, most disagreements happen between the artists and the fabricators where curators are engaging with a very complex world of labour, a deeply intangible, immaterial labour that is bringing something to the world and, at the same time, a highly manual, tangible labour. Between the three of us, we know now that disagreements come first before anything else.

SHO: We're now sitting in a situation because of the pandemic where the formats we can use, at least in Germany, have changed. We are looking at public space, outdoor presentations, and intimate one-to-one meetings in the gallery space. And we are also looking at a world that is changing rapidly both economically and ecologically. Do you, from your part of the world, see any changes in the role of artists and changes in formats that are not only limiting but also inspiring to you?

You started off by saying that you were using the technologies available very early on, to create a wider community, more connections and you mentioned that you spoke to more people than ever this year. Can you see a change in the role of the artist and new formats emerging? Can it also be inspiring for your work?

Shuddhabrata: I think we've always enjoyed the opportunity that curation gives us to create new contexts where different kinds of energies can meet and interact with each other. We think of curation as the work of setting the stage, of invitation and of creating a context where you are the host and you create a protocol by which people have these conversations. Sometimes these are formal, sometimes they're accidental, they're not necessarily saying what you plan for, but they are part of the serendipity of the unexpected.

I'll give you an example of an informal, unplanned process that began happening during the Shanghai Biennale. We were all staying in one of two hotels that were state-run hotels in China and every evening after the installation process, all the artists would gather in the lobby and start drinking and telling

each other stories and singing and reading poems to each other. This became very noisy, and the hotel management decided that the sitting and meeting each other would have to stop, so they removed the furniture from the space. What they didn't realise is that the people would continue sitting on a blue carpet that was still in the room. Gradually we realised that the blue carpet itself became a kind of modus of gathering, which we actually still carry with us. That's an example of the relationship between what is ephemeral and what is perennial. When the conditions of COVID-19 made sure that we could not actually meet in physical space, some of those artists who were also part of the Yokohama Triennial said to us: do you remember the blue carpet, we should return to the spirit of the blue carpet. So the opening of the Yokohama Triennial was actually a walk that happened live by the artists for the artists, by the curators and by the museum staff. We called this an extended blue carpet conversation. Its audience were the artists themselves and of course, other people could join, but the point was that – even though there was a constraint and we could not meet in person – we had a memory of meeting at an earlier time.

Between that memory of meeting and the impossibility of meeting, a form emerged that then segued into what we call the “episodōs” at the Yokohama Triennial. The Yokohama Triennial had to deal with the fact that, because there were physical constraints, some of its processes had to move into other time signatures. So, we created what we call episodōs. These episodōs happened online and sometimes artists would produce episodes. For example, there was one artist called Masaru Iwai, whose practice is connected to cleaning. We had invited him before the pandemic began and now his cleaning practice suddenly took on a new residence online. He produced a social network on Instagram where he would invite other people to put on masks and clean. So there was a spillage between the curatorial energies and how they moved outside the constraints of the curatorial framework and produced new, unexpected gatherings, combinations and possibilities. This is something that I think we should take from this time. The period of COVID-19 has given us a lot of heartache and sadness and melancholia, but it has also made us all inventive and imaginative in how to rethink the questions of gathering, solidarity and conversation. Now, sooner or later, the pandemic will go, but this relationship be-

tween offline, online, this relationship between distance and proximity, the creation of a much larger horizon of expectations around an artwork may remain. This modest availability of means can create a new conversation about how the contemporary art world thinks about space and time. Similarly, our practice is not just about the one event, it extends to recordings, online media, a kind of constant building of its own archival possibility into a way in which the time signature of the Biennale or curation extends in a different way. Many years ago, we had written a text called “Earthworms Dancing”[11], an argument for a slow-motion biennial. I think we are now beginning to realise that the temporal stretch is something that we should all welcome and live with because of the extraordinary characteristics of the time that we’re living in right now.

CURARE participant: I want to go back to what you said earlier about your goal of bringing people together, of getting to a place of mutual curiosity and mutual exploration. You said that as curators you establish a diversity of sources in order to get to this place. But, this does not guarantee that you will achieve equality and mutual explora-

tion, because there’s always individual interests and opinions. How do you establish this environment of mutual exploration and interests, besides just using a diversity of sources?

Jeebesh: Two colleagues of ours who have worked with us in our studio made an intriguing point. Their idea was that we are perennial lines; we may be online or offline, but we are still lines. But then, we are also live dots[12]. Their question is, when we are live dots, what are we doing with each other? An important thing about sources is that they destabilise the time horizons by which individuals produce their individualities. In the present, if you look at the climate change debate, all the discussions are about time horizons. What is the time horizon by which we try to make sense of our lives? Sources are immeasurable; our invitation to each other is to try and be in that immeasurable space that is between one another, to work in this shifting time horizon, to say that all time is nested in other time horizons, which are unknowable, playful, knowable, troubled, and so on. This multiplicity of temporal placements of and intersections with one another is what we think we are inviting people to. We hope that this invitation is mutually en-

chanting. Art has this pressure of being an enchanted place in an alienated and disenchanting world. Whatever part of art history and art theory you read, it is always written with this premise — art has to produce the re-enchantment of the world as if the world is becoming banal and routinised and completely predictable and art produces the sight of surprise, amazement, astonishment, unpredictability. But leaving that aside, what we are trying to say is that the question of time is deeply nested in art and the conversation about art today. It is not an Euro-American time of art history that we are talking about; we are talking about a different timescale to work with.

Through sources, and the way we are working, we are trying to build a weave of time horizons while keeping the immeasurability and curiosity of the turning world. Time horizons will always be shifting around us – the time of economy, the time of crisis, the time of collapse, the boom, the doom, personal time, Proustian time. We are living in a plenitude of unknown times.

Our sources are very intensively subjective. We try to open the riddle of this world, and we can draw from biology, we can draw from ge-

ology; a source can be from anywhere. We are now working on a show in the Vienna Academy of Art, which will open in October 2021. We are working with their collection, and the question is to unpack that collection in a way that hasn't been done before. We are interested in what kind of times are nested in this collection and forgotten. We have named the exhibition: **Hungry for Time** ^[13]. What are the substitutes of time that the project of domination produces? The violence of linear time has been unaccountable, people's lives have been humiliated and subjugated in the idea of linear time. It's not so much a choreography out of a time, it's about registering that accounts and images of time can actually have immense consequences for living life.



Rags Media Collective was established in 1992 by Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta. Their work is located at the intersections of contemporary art, historical enquiry, philosophical speculation, research and theory, often taking the form of installations, online and offline media objects, performances and encounters. Rags follow their self-declared imperative of 'kinetic contemplation' to produce work that demands the viewer to look anew at what they take for granted. Myths and histories of diverse provenances, a deep ambivalence towards modernity and a quiet but consistent critique of the operations of power and property inform their diverse oeuvre. Recent exhibitions include "The Laughter of Tears", Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany (2012); "Still More World", Mathaf Museum, Doha, Qatar (2019); "Twilight Language", Manchester Art Gallery (2017–2018); "Everything Else is Ordinary", K21 Museum for 21st Century Art, Düsseldorf (2018); "If It's Possible, It's Possible", MUAC, Mexico City (2015), and "Untimely Calendar", National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi (2014–2015). Exhibitions curated by Rags include: 7th Yokohama Triennale (2020); "In the Open or in Stealth", MACBA, Barcelona, (2018–2019); "Why Not Ask Again", Shanghai Biennale (2016–2017); "INSERT2014", New Delhi (2014); and "The Rest of Now & Scenarios", Manifesta 7, Bolzano (2008).

^[1] <https://sarai.net/>.

^[2] Rags Media Collective, Additions, Subtractions: On Collectives and Collectivity (2010), https://works.raqsmediacol-lective.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Additios-Subtractions_On-Collectives-and-Col-lectivities-2010-category.pdf.

^[3] <https://sarai.net/category/publications/sarai-reader/>.

^[4] <https://sarai.net/sarai-reader-09-projections/>.

^[5] Sarai Reader 09: The Exhibition (2012-2013). Curated by Rags Media Collective. A collaboration between Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon, and Sarai-Centre for Study of Developing Societies, Delhi.

^[6] The exhibition INSERT2014 took place in 2014 in New Delhi. Artistic direction: Rags Media Collective. Organised by Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi and Pro Helvetia, Swiss Arts Council, New Delhi. Exhibition sites: Mati Ghar, Indira Gandhi Na-

tional Centre for the Arts, New Delhi and Gallery, School of Arts & Aesthetics, JNU, New Delhi. Exhibition's publication: https://works.raqsmediacol-lective.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/INSERT2014Publication_Web.pdf.

^[7] Why Not Ask Again? Arguments, Counter-arguments and Stories, 11th Shanghai Biennale (November 2016-March 2017).

^[8] Liu Cixin, The Three-Body Problem, Head of Zeus (2008).

^[9] In the Open or in Stealth: The Unruly Presence of an Intimate Future (2018-2019). Curated by Rags Media Collective. MACBA - Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain.

^[10] Afterglow, Yokohama Triennale 2020. Artistic Direction: Rags Media Collective. <https://www.yokohamatriennale.jp/english/2020/>.

^[11] Rags Media Collective, Earthworms Dancing: Notes for a Biennial in Slow Motion (2009),

<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/07/61387/earthworms-dancing-notes-for-a-biennial-in-slow-motion/>.

^[12] FMI – Time, a process, commentary by Aarushi Surana and Kaushal Sapre (2020) <https://works.raqsmediacol-lective.net/index.php/2020/11/05/five-million-incidents/>.

^[13] Hungry for Time. An invitation to epistemic disobedience with Rags Media Collective in the art collection of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna (2021-2022).

Krist

Gruijthuijzen

Shaping an
Institution

KW / KRIST GRUIJTHUISEN



Solvej Helweg Ovesen: As the director of KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, can you tell us about your approach to that position? What motivates you to put on an exhibition? Does it start with an interest in specific themes or is that not the way you move forward when planning a programme? How do you define the space you work in? How do you refer to it? And finally, what's your agenda right now? Could you perhaps share with us what you're working on at the moment? We're interested in hearing your point of view as an artistic and managing director.

Krist Gruijthuijsen: I'll start by giving you a bit of a background and an introduction to myself. I'm Dutch and an artist with a background in theatre. It's important to highlight that, because my background has continuously had a significant influence on aspects of my work when it comes to my curatorial, editorial and managerial practice.

Now, I'm talking to you from the position of being a director of an institution. I'm going to speak from that point of view today. That is also a very clear autonomous practice that

brings a lot of different things together – I am either running the institution or editing books or producing performances or making exhibitions of my own, the role doesn't just entail being the director of an institution. There are many ways to approach this role, 'to tackle instituting', as one says these days.

My background as an artist has fuelled a lot of things. I made a very deliberate choice to be a freelancer for 12 years, which is not easy. Being Dutch helped, as the Netherlands is one of the easiest countries to be working in independently. I was frequently able to get grants as a curator, for writing or for editing. So, I definitely made use of that privilege, of being able to find space for yourself to develop things, but at the same time trying to experiment with exhibition making on many different levels and in many different places. I also definitely made a lot of use of the many residency programmes that emerged in the late 90s and early 2000s. That's just a bit of a background to help you understand how I ended up working at the institution (KW).

About ten years ago, I co-founded an institution in Amsterdam called Kunstverein. We founded this institution to highlight what was

considered to be elitist. Through this institution, we wanted to talk about things that are too complicated, too inaccessible. We did exactly that, we worked with and questioned everything that is overlooked, obscure, radical, anything. It was a small scale; it was all about embracing the small scale. The institution still exists and operates today.

Then I arrived here at KW. It was an institution that I respected, but also one I felt very disengaged with. And I asked myself why that was the case. Even though Berlin has an international mentality, it is still very local on many levels. My relationship with KW was good at the beginning, and then it kind of fizzled out, particularly over the last few years. So, when I was contacted to apply for this job, I approached things at first in a way that came naturally to me. I asked myself: “How do I feel? How do I relate to the space? How do I relate to how you’re being treated? How do I relate to the programme?” Just very personal things.

And this is how everything unfolded in the last four years, and this is how I’ve done it in the past as well. It really starts from there. For example, I don’t like the entrance, I don’t like

how my body moves through space. It’s the really simple things you start from. Of course, it’s a cliché when you have a new director, that they will want to change everything, particularly when it comes to smaller institutions. KW is sort of on the borderlines – it’s on the borderline of being big, but small enough to be malleable. I’m part of a restructuring that is going on in the institution. The city recently managed to give us more subsidies in order to become autonomous.

The Recent History of KW Institute for Contemporary Art

KW used to be run with two different hats. The Berlin Biennale and KW were always together, and they were also financially dependent on each other. So, if the Berlin Biennale, for example, would go bankrupt, KW would go bankrupt, which is a very unhealthy setup. We convinced the city a couple of years ago to divorce the two. Not institutionally, we’re still KW, but we’re now split into two departments with two directors. That created a lot of calm within the institution. So, when I started on the 1st of July 2016, there was no-one work

ing for me. All the contracts were dissolved. I literally started alone in the office. I only re-appointed my personal assistant. She started on the 5th of July. This was both beautiful and stressful. I had to build up a completely new team, in an institution that was, at the time, twenty-five years old. I also wanted to build on this legacy and this knowledge. What I did is that I tried to just call the people that had worked here in the past on different projects and interviewed them to see what kind of position I could offer them within the new structure of the institution. I had to restructure this institution that has a long history, but all of a sudden everything was up for grabs. For example, I completely rearranged the use of space – the office moved from the front, back to where it used to be at the very beginning, attached to the galleries. It was really important for me that you walk out of the office, straight into the gallery, this way you're immediately engaged with what's happening on the floor and you can correct it right away. I'm always correcting everything everywhere. In terms of space, the Berlin Biennale is like a harmonica, it stretches itself from six employees to seventy employees every couple of years. So, you really need the extra office space for that.

Throughout the last thirty years, this little piece of land became highly privileged. It's subsidised, so everybody that works here hardly pays anything. But the people who work here, who have their offices here, they've been with us for the last ten to fifteen years. Some artists have been living here since the 90s, they've been here with us for a long, long time. They pay 400 Euros for a hundred square metre apartment, just to give you an idea.

I'll tell you about the landscape architects who have an office here. They do our gardening and take care of all the plants. The garden consists of plants chosen by our patrons. It's really an organic way of showing their contribution, without having plaques, which we didn't want. They are also working on really integrating the garden, which in the past was much more experimental. But now due to our fire regulations and the renovation, which I will get into a bit later, we had to make some adjustments. The garden is at the maximum of what we could do in terms of green. The shape of the garden follows the map that we got from the Fire department which showed where you were allowed to plant and where you weren't. It's also a bit of a critique playing with that.

A graphic designer who does the design for Café Bravo (located in KW) also has an office here. There are a lot of interactions between other people that rent here. We also have around five to six apartments, which we use for artists and other people we work with.

This was already initiated by Ellen Blumenstein who was a chief curator here and she had a rather dense public programme. I also pushed for this to continue, because this is not an institution that has exhibitions and a little bit of a public programme. But the public programme is equally important to the exhibitions. That also means that we have a lot of traffic of people coming in, so we need those apartments. We also want people to stay longer – so that artists that we work with can be here with their families for three months to prepare the show.

I really wanted to create that sense of community, I wanted to instigate this internal conversation in this courtyard and in an area that has changed so massively. I mean, Auguststrasse is absolutely not the sexy gallery street it used to be. KW is still part of the conversation at the moment as it was in the 1990s and early 2000, it's still a place to visit, gather and meet. It still has its appeal.

A Pluri-Vocal Space

We are restructuring and re-establishing the institution internally now. I wanted to get rid of a couple of things. Firstly, I didn't want to build an institution that's moulded after one person or one voice that decides everything. I don't think that this represents the time we live in anymore. What does an art centre or centre of contemporary art mean in Berlin today? What else can it do?

That's why we built up a larger curatorial team. I did that to have more input, but also to tap into more issues within the city. We've always been interested in and dealing with city politics through the Biennale and through other projects, but I also wanted to give curators more time to go in-depth into certain research topics. That said, we are an artist-driven institution. So, we're not HKW, we're not research-based. The research always translates into an artistic venture. That's really important for me, because I really want everything to be fuelled through an artistic lens. Also, what's important for us is trying to understand this institution today beyond the nostalgia it carries with it, or burden itself with, i.e., the 90s of KW. We are thinking about



“I’m actually not the artistic director, I’m the director – it’s a very big difference.”

the future, about what this institution is, what it can do and who it represents. Who are the people who come here? I don’t believe in focusing on one community. I think this is not a one community place and I don’t want it to be that. So, it’s represented differently than SAVVY for example which is a much more community-based organisation. I want this to be a place for multiple communities that tap into different elements in our programme. For example, we reinstated the Pogo Bar, which used to be a club in the early 2000s. It was a little techno club in a basement. And now it’s a place for social curation – of course on hold at the moment due to COVID-19. We always work with different communities and different artists from various places in Berlin. They curate the evening, they decide on the drink, who performs etc. Around 60 to 80 people can go in at one time. It’s something that we’ve been doing for three years quite successfully. The fact that it’s a smaller scale definitely helps. It also really works amongst young people. There is still a very “white” image of this institution. This doesn’t mean that diversity is about colour at all, but it’s a way to engage differently.

Back to the curatorial position. So, I am the director, which besides curating also involves dealing with all the different matters of running the institution. I’m not the artistic director, I’m the director – it’s a very big difference. I’m also the chief curator which means that I run the other curators. There is another curator who curates with me in the “house”. So, the two of us basically programme the “house”. Then we have two associate freelance positions, two particularly independent thinkers who come to us with proposals. The position of the associate curator is usually a three to four-year residency in which a curator comes to us with a proposal wanting to use KW as a platform to dig deeper into the research they are already working on within their practice. And it’s often people who I think are not meant to be working in institutions, they don’t understand the bureaucracy of institutions, they are not interested in making budgets, or any of those things. But they have brilliant minds, and they also need space and support.

I also created this programme as a critical input for the curatorial team. The residents come in once a month and I meet with them and discuss their project; in the meantime,

they work on their longer research project. The first one we appointed was Tirdad Zolghadr, who just finished his residency with us. Actually, he is going to do one last symposium in November about rural gentrification, which is a particularly relevant and interesting topic now during the pandemic. He has been trying to understand gentrification more artistically, working with various communities in the city. One of the biggest projects that came out of his research was at Haus der Statistik last September. This also taps into other projects we have done in the past such as 37 rooms in 1992 or the first Berlin Biennale or other projects on the topic of cityscapes or city politics. So, there is a continuation. Then we have Mason Leaver-Yap, who is more of a producer and got themselves more into the production of moving images, which they've been doing for over a decade, and they do the same here. They basically point out two artists per year, who get a budget to produce a new film. It's a complete luxury for these artists, because they get to work with a producer and a curator by their side for a whole year. Two films come out of it which then premiere in Berlin, but they are always in dialogue with other institutions globally. It's called the KW

Productions series, which is a collaboration with Julia Stoschek. That's an ongoing project.

Recently we appointed Clémentine Deliss as an associate curator, who is a professor and a pioneer in anticolonial conversations, especially in relation to museological studies. She is someone whom I've been in conversation with for over ten years now. She has been appointed to form a Museum University, she calls it "Metabolic University". In the next three years, this project is going to tap into the politics of collecting in Berlin, which is, again, a very topical subject – particularly through a deep colonial lens. It's a visual project, it's not discursive. We're not just talking about museum collections, but also artist collections or more obscure collections such as beautiful collections of sounds by animals. There are so many different fantastic collections to look at here in Berlin.

We're not a collecting institution, which means we can have a more critical stance about them and take them out of their coffins, and see how they can be activated differently.

We also have two assistant curators who often curate the public programme or Pogo Bar, but mostly work with the anatomy on an exhibition.

We recently also appointed a curator for “The Digital Sphere”. That is only the second position in Germany in this field. This is someone who is going to develop the digital arm of KW and it will be as important as the exhibition programme. Of course, we all saw everybody panicking during COVID, diving into the digital realm in the most naive ways. We did it as well, but we also tried to keep it as close to us as possible. It was interesting, because I was already working on developing the digital part of KW for the last year and a half. I’m a very analogue person, but I do believe in the diversity of the digital space, if you really take it as serious material and as a representational space. We appointed Nadim Samman, who is someone who has been doing projects like this for a long time and also really thinks in a much more political way on that subject. As you can see, we’ve expanded the scope of what this institution does quite a bit.

Of course, some things need time, they might need three years to develop for instance, and

then they get some visibility. It’s also really important for us that KW is not just a place for presentation, it’s really a place for production. We produce new work for every new show that we do. We don’t have much money to pay the artists. The artists get a 4000 Euro fee, which I had to fight for in the city, because normally artists get 1500 Euros, but, here in KW, the artists work on a show for a year and a half, so that’s nothing, it’s really nothing. But it taps into the fact that the artists that we work with, we work with for a long period of time.

Our curatorial engagement with an artist is extremely intense. Most artists love it, because they’ve never had such a critical, intense conversation partner. That is possible for us because we have more curators in the house.



An Artist-Driven Institution

CURARE participant: In a way, do you also pay the artists through the visibility they get?

Krist: Yes, you also pay them with visibility in some ways. The market's visibility can boost an artist's sales. There are a lot of ways to look at it economically, but the way we approach it is that there is an artist fee, and there's also the production of a new piece. Publishing is extremely important for KW, and it became even more important now that I'm here, because it's half of my curatorial work, but I don't randomly make a book per show, just because we need a book.

What else really changed in that sense is that, because it's such an artist-driven institution, we also make it about an artist programme. We look at artists who have been very influential for generations in particular regions in the world. We look at the world globally and focus on certain regions where we've tapped into for a little longer and then find a character, a figure that has had a significant impact on the scene and on its development. What's important for us is that these people

are artists, not curators or museum directors. Whether we look at North America, or at South America, or the Middle East, we have a long line of people we look at. We did an exhibition of Beatriz González. We're now doing an exhibition of Leonilson from Brazil. These are all characters that most people in the West wouldn't know, but you actually see how influential they were, and they're not the household names here, because there's not a market built around those names.

We usually make two ambitious exhibitions per year. They're basically museum shows that 30 people normally work on, but I believe that these shows need to happen and I have the power to bring them here. I've convinced all the bigger museums in the world – Pompidou, Tate etc., to make us a serious partner. It's also interesting for them to not always have shows that only go to those five, six big museums worldwide, but to see if an art centre could actually be able to live up to their standards. We have the space for it but, that's also because no museum will do what we do here. There is no museum that would bring these names here. So, we do have to take on this retrospective role, which is often the foundation of our thinking in our seasons. We work

in seasons, three seasons per year which are presented through the lens of three characters and those three characters represent the subject matter that we want to talk about. That's why I keep saying that the artist-driven element is so important for us. If, for instance, we want to talk about non-binary positions or identity politics, the disregard of bodies or health systems, or whatever we think is relevant today, we approach it through the lens of another David Wojnarowicz or Anna Daučíková. She had such an extraordinary practice that she developed in this communist-socialist environment where she was completely repressed by her transpositions (cryptic reformulations of her work in response to the fear of USSR censorship).

There are so many ways of tackling a topic and also doing something for the artists at the same time. I also still think that in this city, in which the economy is built around the artists, we need a certain set of very clear, established centres for contemporary art that just show artists. This is why the group shows that we do at KW are always through the lens of an artist – we never do a big group show with a thematic concept. KW used to do thematic group shows in the past, but not under my di-

rectorship. For example, last year, we showed the exhibitions *The Making of Husbands* and *Christina Ramberg* in dialogue with one another. We take a position that is completely obscure and overlooked but very special and build a group show around it to bring it into conversation today.

Another topic that we are very interested in is looking at how bodies are constructed to stand in normalised, standardised situations of gender. We have more shows on at the same time, there's a dialogue. Each season is curated, in the sense that we write an ongoing programme, which I consider to be one big group show where we start talking about a specific topic. It's a long written curatorial proposal that unfolds in front of the visitors. If the function of KW is to present to you what you already know, then we might as well close down, because places like this are there to educate us, you, the visitor and to provoke what we want to talk about in politics or in society, but also always to find uncommon ground, try to experiment all the time. That includes bringing names you don't know. We want you to go to this institution, because you believe in the way it is curated and in the dedication we show in what we do. That's why we need

to continue doing the programme we do for another four years so that people actually understand how things operate here.

SHO: First of all, I really appreciate what you have told us already, because I think that from a curatorial perspective it makes a lot of sense to have a longer narrative within an institution. I also think it's very important to have heard your explanation about why the names you show here are rarer and how you build the programme around them. It could be interesting to hear how your research developed. You're in touch with so many people here in Berlin and you have an amazing curatorial team. How do you meet people and get inspired and become sure that this is a person you would like to work with?

Krist: That's a good question. I always say, yes. And again, I'm talking from a very privileged point of view. As the director of a more renowned institution like this, you get a lot of invitations to travel around the country and abroad because this is the ideal exchange. Bringing a director of an institution to Russia and then you bring back artists from there.

When I get those invitations, I almost always say yes and I always come back with at least something, where I'm like, oh my God. For example, I was invited to go to Saudi Arabia, and I said, "Yes, I'm going to Saudi Arabia" – that was the last trip I did. And actually, the only reason why I went to Saudi Arabia is so that I would meet artists who also disagree with the system and the regime they operate in and need to be heard. So why would I not travel? I have this ambassador role and I'm able to bring these voices out of the regime to criticise it.

So instead of saying I'm not going to Saudi Arabia, because I disagree with the regime, I think that it's important to go and then work from within. That's one way I do research. I also still do one studio visit a week in Berlin, there are so many artists here, it's really unbelievable in comparison to anywhere in the world, so that's fantastic.

And this takes time... We already know what we have in 2023, that's how far we are. That means that I don't programme like Hans Ulrich Obrist programmes for example, because he leaves two or three gaps in the programme, so that he can be on point – the first to show.

That's a strategy and that's fine, but that's not the strategy we follow. The way we go about it is to say: "This is a really interesting position. What can we do with this position and what will this position mean in two years' time? Is it timeless? Is it a position that is only there, because it responds directly to today?" We tend to be more interested in a position that has a longer breath.



Krist Gruijthuijsen is a curator and art critic who has been the director of KW Institute for Contemporary Art since 2016. He curated exhibitions by Hanne Lippard, Ian Wilson, Adam Pendleton, Ronald Jones, Hiwa K, Willem de Rooij, Beatriz González, David Wojnarowicz, Hreinn Friðfinnsson, Hassan Sharif, and Leonilson among others, and has edited numerous publications. Gruijthuijsen was artistic director of the Grazer Kunstverein (2012-2016) and course director of the MA Fine Arts at the Sandberg Instituut, Amsterdam (2011-2016). He is one of the co-founding directors of the Kunstverein in Amsterdam and has organised many exhibitions and projects over the past decade, including Manifesta 7 (Trentino-South Tyrol), Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center (Istanbul), Artists Space (New York), Museum of Contemporary Art (Belgrade), Swiss Institute (New York), Galeria Vermelho (São Paulo), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), Project Arts Centre (Dublin), among others.

Övül Ö.

Durmuşoğlu &

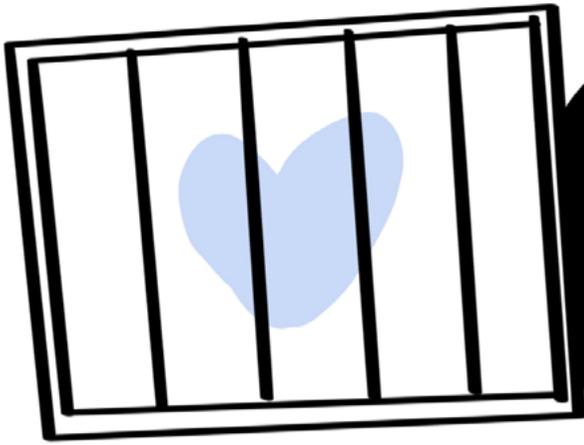
Joanna Warsza

Art as—Recovery,

Necessity,

Together —

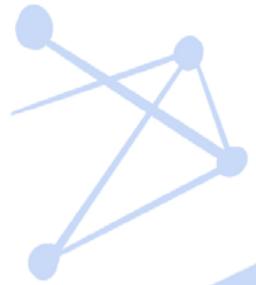
On „Die Balkone“
and on what and what
not to go back to?



PRISON of Love

B²

BE CONNECTED WITH THE NEIGHBOURHOOD



HALF-CONSCIOUS DECISIONS SHAPE THE FUTURE

CREATE a new LANGUAGE

FEMINIST

COLLECTIVITY TAKE RISKS

THINK

TRANSLATION WORK



PROPOSE NEW FORMS

»EVERYTHING HAPPENED VERY FAST«
LOCAL HISTORY FROM THE GROUNDS
Follow different tracks

INTERSECTIONS



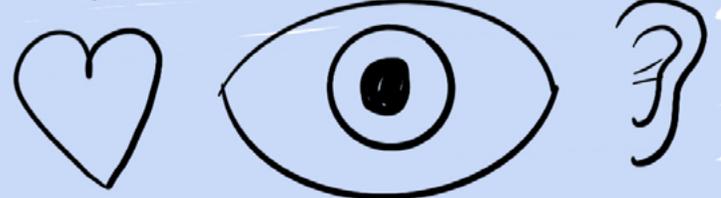
DOWN TO EARTH POSITION

INFRASTRUCTURAL WORK



BUILD WORLDS INSIDE WORLDS

MULTI-SENSITIVITY



It was in the first weeks of the quarantine. It became clear that the more isolated we felt, the more we were in need of intimacy and contact, intellectually and emotionally. So we decided to come together — at a healthy distance—in a popular park in our neighbourhood. It was a warm sunny afternoon despite the state of exception. We sat on a bench and talked about hope and possibility, which brought us to talk about the balconies and their political history as stages of resilience and as places both private and public at the same time. Balconies are terraces of openness and hope, as well as platforms for authoritarianism and supremacy, as thresholds from which we can encounter the world while in confinement of the domestic: which is safe and sound for some, but not for others. The emergency exit to take a breath of fresh air, catch a moment of sunshine or a smoke. We talked on how they became unique sites of everyday performance or even civic mobilisation in times when staying home reveals itself as a privilege. How they turned from luxury terraces to the signs of democratisation. Every architecture school has its own way of designing balconies. Everyone has their own way of inhabiting them. Especially now. We decided to reach out to the balconies of the

world, against isolation and individualisation, not leaving everything in the hands of the virus and the fear it generates.

We also talked about our condition of being independent curators at this moment. In reality, independence means a lot of dependence: on grants, moods, circumstances, encounters, favours and interests. And yet there is something that has always attracted us to remain so, at least partly (next to our respective teaching assignments) and that is, in the first place, the proximity to artists' positions and their vulnerability, secondly the deep feeling of freedom to privilege art and content and thirdly responsiveness to urgencies when institutional channels are blocked or too slow.

Longing for art as a bodily encounter, mixed with a feeling of horror vacui and the unwillingness to join yet another digital exhibition or guided tour, we decided to address an invitation to the artists, writers, architects, choreographers living in our neighbourhood Prenzlauer Berg to share some signs of life on their balconies and windows during the Easter Weekend in a form of a public exhibition of sorts. We realised that this was the moment: We were all here and on our own in our quar-

antine spaces and not hectically travelling, as usually required by our work responsibilities. We started with our friends, who invited other friends, and that made us reach out to strangers. Our invitation was picked up very fast and the whole initiative grew with a snowball effect. With zero budget, no opening, and no crowds, the project turned into an intimate stroll (with respect to current regulations) to search for signs of life, art, and points of kinship and connection. Thousands and thousands of people left their screens and came over. We were deeply moved by the warm reaction and curiosity of different publics.

Prenzlauer Berg is one of the neighbourhoods which many have prejudices against. It is generally considered an area of privilege, shaped around the needs of the nuclear family and only consisting of playgrounds, ice cream parlours, organic food markets and restaurants. But Prenzlauer Berg is also home to artists, theatre people or writers. The neighbourhood has an important history of artist squats, takeovers, one-night exhibitions and many East-German artists have lived here since the 1980s. In former East Germany, just as in communist Poland, what was public, in a sense of non-intimidated or uncensored art

and life, frequently happened in someone's kitchen rather than out in the open. Specifically, Prenzlauer Berg is a place where home-made resistance against the GDR hit critical mass. Today many locally and internationally acclaimed artists, often disconnected from the locality, continue to live here. Actually, more than we expected.

And as two women curators coming from two major working-class minorities of Germany, we decided to join our forces and visions, to collaborate on a way of art making that we both believe in. In less than fifteen days, this neighbourhood initiative/exhibition put people closer together than any regular contemporary art event. It made neighbours reach out to each other, it made various art communities intermingle, over fifty artists including their families. We chose to create an equally in/visible and open public frame by challenging GPS in our hands, on our smartphones, and GPS in our heads, the memory of streets in our neighbourhood. To protect people's privacy we didn't give out the artist's addresses, we created a map with dots - with generous help from Józefina Chętko - and a list of artists living in the area, but you would not know who did which work. In that sense



it was an anti-hegemonic stroll, beyond a particular authorship. Our only curatorial choice was not the list of achievements of certain artists or its symbolic value, but the postcode of the area and the question of how we relate to our isolation and the pandemic, starting from where we live.

Invited artists, curators, writers, architects, choreographers didn't seek our curatorial approval of their statements and contributions as it might happen in a standard setting, and we were by no means the symbolic gate keepers of the content. Everybody was producing what they felt like at the moment, on the threshold between life and art, private and public, in the windows and on balconies. Be it a swing hanging from the door, an action of spring cleaning by throwing unnecessary stuff through the window, or reading poems through an intercom. Artists Lina Majdalanie and Rabih Mroué actually did invite all the neighbours of their house to take part, who activated their windows and balconies, and the whole building spoke.

In the COVID-19 public debate in Germany, the artists and curators are not considered 'essential' (systemrelevant), and perhaps for

good reasons. We cannot save lives, but we can support them with a grain of meaning, situate them ontologically, tease a narration, shape thoughts and experiences on what is private, public and political, show signs of life from windows and balconies, experience something together through hope, empathy, joy and sadness. "Die Balkone" brought us a lot of belief in art, and re-made art into almost a drug. Art as a way of thinking about the world, as a way of building bonds and relations, as a way of creating meaning, and in this project, as a way of fabricating a non-digital community in isolation, piecing together a neighbourhood, remembering that some can't stay home. Art presented from within domestic spaces also felt more intimate somehow. And this could be one thing to learn from that experience, to zoom into where one lives, to take time, to stop the hectic acceleration of production and consumption.

It was an urgency that put us into motion, to break the helplessness which is intensified by the media. The postponed exhibitions and events, fired museum educators, collapsing budgets, the feeling that whatever we do, we can only do it in the digital, and without asking who profits from that. In the meantime, when

some of us can lock ourselves in and some of us can't, when we are mourning our losses, some governments – the Polish and Turkish, sadly included – taking dangerous decisions to consolidate their power that may change the course of the future after COVID-19.

We are often being asked now - by various media from different parts of the world: „How was this project different from what you realised before? What did you learn from it? What not to go back to?“ And we do ask ourselves the famous Bruno Latour question: „What are some suspended activities that you would like to see not coming back?“ What do we want to keep and what not?

What our initiative also asked for, is to look at our vocabulary of production and exhibition making, the language use. We tend to forget many things in the professional art world. One of them is the joy and sense of communicating, sometimes it is that simple and that powerful. We also forgot that we do too much, too fast and too hectically, yet we cannot live without each other, only behind the screens. Now with the obligatory slow down, we also realised that we forgot the agency that art has in the public sphere and space to respond

and to express needs and urges. Especially now public art reveals itself as part of healing, as a means to produce imaginative forms of ‚publicness‘ in times where many gatherings for the upcoming months might be risky. It offers itself as a medium to relate to each other avoiding crowd-making. It comes forth as a powerful agency to reshape publicness, to create forms of care, support and societal well-being or just a random encounter. What is public and counterpublic in public art? What is art's role in the construction of the public sphere, and of society at large? Many of us, not only cultural workers, are in need of situating ourselves in that moment, looking for ontological meaning outside of the museums in the eerie city landscapes. This is an extraordinary opportunity for art to reach out, to rethink our interdependencies to each other and to the non-human, and finally perhaps to offer us some screen quarantine. We often read in curatorial and artistic statements about the power of art to recontextualise the status quo, and create different narrations, but it hardly happens. „Die Balkone“ as a spontaneous instance of art in public made us believe again that art can be in fact a way of creating freedom within confinement, a way of shaping relations, re-understanding

intimacy, a way of overcoming fear, and a way of creating moments of togetherness.

To be able to translate what Naomi Klein very recently phrased as „to kick the door of radical possibility open“ to our field of contemporary art meant challenging exhibition/project making structures and codes of working: to go into the local streets, to start from where we know best, to realise a response, a connecting gesture in a short while, a smoke sign to tell one another „I am here, I am alive“ with zero budget, no commissioning frame, no commissioning at all, no funders, no opening, no spectacle, no fly in and out, no view and preview, no VIP and no champagne, no art market as we usually operate in the professional contemporary art world. The common concern we all had with the participants was more substantial than when operating according to the ‘normal’ codes of conduct. It was a form of bonding, solidarity and conversation with the medium of art. We need to highlight that we are absolutely against working for free and any form of exploitation, but if there is a need for engagement, then there are these rare situations where one can do something just because one feels like it, where the economic aspect does not play a role. And of course, it would be even better

if under normal conditions there would be more fairness and equal pay in a very hierarchised art world. We also have to say that the city of Berlin was extremely responsive with offering a quick support for freelancers, and not based on nationality, but based on who works, creates and pays taxes here, on who - in other words - who is a neighbour.

It is the neighbourhood concept that made „Die Balkone“ relevant for various cultural contexts. We received questions for possible sister editions from India, Ghana, Chile, Indonesia, France or Poland. Although the requests come from different countries, we don’t think we should follow a ‚Biennale model‘ where we fly around the world and implement it in various contexts. Those places and local curators and communities will know the best way to make their own editions. You are a neighbour always and everywhere, and everywhere you should be able to think about how to live together and if art can be useful here, especially now, even better.

Övül Ö. Durmuşoğlu is a curator, writer and educator living in Berlin. As a curator, she acts between exhibition making and public programming, singular languages and collective energies, worldly immersion, and political cosmologies. Currently, Övül is a guest professor and programme co-leader at the Graduate School at the University of the Arts in Berlin and a visiting professor at Hochschule für Bildende Kunst Braunschweig. She co-initiated “Die Balkone: Life, Art, Pandemic and Proximity” in Berlin with Joanna Warsza in April 2020. Her recent curatorial project “Stars Are Closer and Clouds Are Nutritious Under Golden Trees” took place at the MMAG Foundation, Amman in 2019. In the past, Övül was curator for Autostrada Biennale, Kosovo; steirischer herbst festival in Graz; curator-director for YAMA public screen in Istanbul; curatorial advisor for Gülsün Karamustafa’s “Chronographia” at Hamburger Bahnhof, artistic director for the festival Sofia Contemporary 2013 with the title “Near, Closer, Together: Exercises for a Common Ground”. She curated programmes within the 10th, 13th, and 14th Istanbul Biennials, coordinated and organised different programmes and events at Maybe Education and public programmes for documenta 13.

Joanna Warsza is a Berlin-based interdependent curator, editor and writer interested in how art functions beyond the protection of the so-called white cubes. Currently she is a co-curator of the Polish Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale with an art piece by Romani-Polish artist Malgorzata Mirga-Tas. Together with Övül Ö. Durmuşoğlu, she also co-curates “Die Balkone” in Berlin, the 3rd and the 4th Autostrada Biennale in Kosovo, and the 12th Survival Kit in Riga. Since 2014 is a programme director of CuratorLab at Konstfack University of Arts in Stockholm, Sweden. Her recent publications include “Red Love. A Reader” on Alexandra Kollontai (co-edited by Maria Lind and Michele Masucci; Sternberg Press, Konstfack Collections, and Tensta Konsthall, 2020), and “And Warren Nieśtuchowski Was There: Guest, Host, Ghost” (co-edited by Sina Najafi, 2020). In 2022, she joined the board of Fondation Pernod Ricard.



Agustín

Pérez Rubio

Decolonising the
Mind — Curating
in Times of
Crises



BERLIN BIENNALE 11 //

RENATA CERVETTO
AGUSTIN PÉREZ RUBIO

Contemporize history



CHANGE PERSPECTIVE
eurocentric
KNOWLEDGE

Don't
look at
me

What can we give
to the artist
community?

HEALING
& RESTITUTION
RECONCILIATION



In every
project
some way
of exchange

normativity
coloniality

We don't
go backwards

good art?
Who is
allowed to be
an artist?



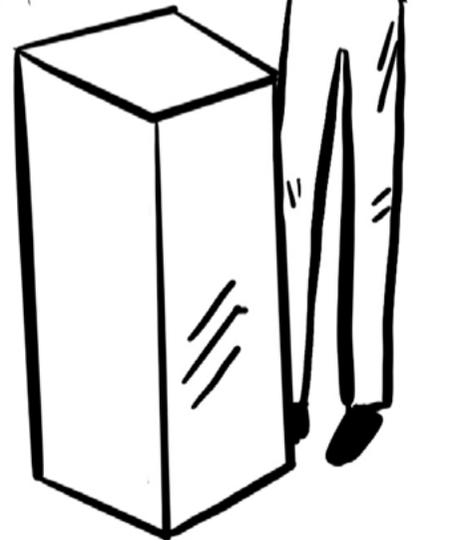
How do we
act as
Colonisers?

Intertwined

Spiritual instinct
before reason



CULTURE



Counter-
narrative

Oh, this
culture is
going to die

how to we look
at the objects

positions of
IDENTITY

modernity
is BASED
ON RACIST
MACHIST

OPEN QUESTION

CURARE participant: You mentioned earlier that you have a background in history and art history. It seems that in the Biennale you're trying to bring these two together – most of the installations we saw at Gropius Bau refer to history. For example, there were one or two installations that included authentic historical objects, or rather copies of authentic historical objects. What's the meaning of history in our lives today? How do you deal with history in your exhibitions?

Agustín Pérez Rubio: In the Biennale there are just copies of the original artefacts. That is why they should be presented as reproductions and not as art pieces. Of course, the artists extensively researched authentic material and objects, but we didn't want to fetishise this. Another approach is what we did with the project by Francisco Huichaqueo ^[1], where we didn't include any copies of artefacts in the exhibition. His project was a kind of healing, a kind of restitution. We were researching here in Berlin to find out where the Mapuche ^[2] collections were – whether they were in private or public hands – and the biggest and most accessible collection was the

public one. So, it was much easier to get the permission to obtain the artefact which the artist needed from the public collection. In the beginning, he wanted to install the pieces in a different way, but the conservators didn't allow it. It was a long discussion, which is of course something that you don't see, because it was part of the process.

Now regarding history, we know that there are a lot of things in these exhibitions that people don't know about, or others that they don't necessarily think about. This is not canonical history, it's another way of interpreting knowledge. For instance, Huichaqueo's work shows that there are other ways of interpreting cosmology, the Mapuche cosmology etc. A lot of things that are common knowledge in South America are completely unknown here in Germany. For example, Aline Baiana's work *The Cross of the South* (2020) is something very popular in South America, but here in Germany, it is not. It always happens that people of South America know perfectly well all the popular things from Europe, but it doesn't work the other way around. This demonstrates the Eurocentrism and universalism of our Western culture.

CURARE participant: I know exactly what you mean. For example, people in Africa learn global history in their history courses. They just learn the history of Europe, but not the history of their own people. However, with all the changes happening over the last couple of years, they are considering writing their national history, whereas in Europe, we're just permanently focusing on our own national histories.

Agustín: Imagine that until the 1990s, the books, the educational books for children, in the entirety of Latin America, mainly came from two Spanish publishers. And they were called "The discovery of the Americas" – not the conquest but the discovery of the Americas! So even in their own countries, they learn that they "discovered" Argentina, Brazil etc. This coloniality is implied – it is implied that the knowledge comes "from Europe to us". Economically speaking, these publishers made a lot of money by selling these books, but also if we look at it in terms of content – these books presented a very Eurocentric point of view, in very derogatory ways. But people in Latin America grow up this way and it follows you later in life. For example, in

Cuba, a person who has curly hair is called Pelo Malo which means bad hair. This type of terminology comes from the idea of the casts that the Spaniards and Portuguese imposed in Latin America – casts of races and colours, of ways of looking. These imposed limits on the place people can have in society. For instance, a black person could own a shop, but could never be a politician. Maybe they could work in commerce, but they would never be able to be educated or run for mayor of their city, even if they came from a small village. This demonstrates how coloniality affects not only land or objects but also bodies, beliefs and psyche. And how the colony worked in the minds of both the Creole elites, as well as the mestizos and indigenous or Afro-descendants in the way of imposing a hegemony that has often been installed long after the period of independence.

This is all in the system which is imposed, and this concept exists in language and in people's beliefs. There is a lot of history behind all this. But many of the concepts that we brought with the Biennale are very popular in Latin American, they are an important part of its history.



CURARE participant: Did you include artists in the Biennale who you already knew or did you research to find artists you hadn't worked with before?

Agustín: Both I would say. First of all, we were following our biographies and personal background. From our own countries, there are five artists minimum in the Biennale: from Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Spain. We were also interested in the routes the Spaniards and the Portuguese followed on the way to the colonies. For instance, we have four Filipino artists in the Biennale, because the Philippines were a big Spanish colony. Also due to this coloniality, Filipino artists have a close relationship with Mexican artists. When you go to Manilla, the first thing you see is a cargo with lots of hearts, and this is a type of iconography that looks very Mexican. Also, the permanent wet markets in the Philippines are called Palengke, which is a Mexican-Spanish word. Historically, the Mexicans were part of the Spanish crown and boats would travel from Spain to Mexico and from Mexico to the Philippines. We were also interested in India (more specifically in Goa, because Goa was a Portuguese colony). There were many artists who we knew, but hadn't worked with before or other artists who

were in the background of our own experiences or research.

Although I had never worked with Filipino artists, I had visited the Philippines twice and I already had an ongoing exchange with some artists from there. For example, I knew that Kiri Dalena was collaborating on a film with the Spanish artist Paloma Polo who is a friend of mine and there were a lot of similar instances. But we never “discovered” artists, we were not among these curators whose aim is to “discover” artists. I only went on one trip for the Biennale, to Canada, which is a country I had lived in for a year and a half in the past. María Berríos ^[3] also knows Canada, as her parents were immigrants who moved from Chile to Canada. She arrived in Canada when she was five or six years old, and she went to a Canadian school. So in Canada, there are a lot of artists we were familiar with, but we had never worked with before. For instance, I knew Shuvinai Ashoona. I have actually studied the history of her grandmother, Pitseolak Ashoona, and her cousin. The grandmother of Shuvinai, belongs to a group of revered Inuit women artists in the 1950s known for their drawings. Her cousin was Annie Pootoogook whose successful artistic career was tragi-

cally cut short by her death in 2016 when she drowned in a river. There is a lot of violence in these communities. That's why, for example, in Shuvinai's drawings in KW[4], you can see monsters, most of which have a large penis. Shuvinai is an artist with mental health issues, even though she was never diagnosed. She has never spoken about this openly, but it is said that these monsters are about the abuse that her grandmother, her mother and her cousin have described to her or even the abuses she herself may have suffered. The Canadians in the 1960s gave the indigenous people money to keep them silent in the Indian reservations. So the men stopped working as they no longer needed to earn money and instead they spent their money on alcohol. As a result, they would get very drunk at night and would rape the women of the community. This is structural violence created by white men. These are stories that she never talked about openly, but her grandmother and other women artists talk about them through her drawings. So even though I never worked with her before, there is a connection between us, as there was with the other artists – we can always say how the collaboration came about.

We never did any intense travelling for research. We did a lot of studio visits in Berlin and that is why there are twelve artists from Berlin in the Biennale. We are four curators working at the same level, so each of us would bring some artists, but then the others would always pose questions such as: "Why this artist? In relation to what? What is the project? How does this project relate to other ideas and concepts we are working on?"

CURARE participant: I wanted to ask about "collective curating". How did you approach it? How did you separate the tasks? Who was responsible for what?

Agustín: We've been living in Berlin since February 2019. We won the competition in September 2018 and the first official visit was one week in November, then there was one in December and one in January. In February, Renata, Lisette and I came to live here full-time. María came a bit later, because she has a child and a husband in Denmark – she came at the end of July. We opened the space in September. All this was in our proposal.

Regarding our methodology, every decision was a collective decision. Every artist in the Biennale was a decision we made collectively. Each of us would bring artists and ideas to the table, but then the final decision was made by all four of us. The way we went about it was as follows: Every singular decision about texts, projects, inviting people for talks or exhibitions in the temporary berlin biennial office and exhibition space ExRotaPrint^[5], the selection of artists for the biennial itself etc., everything had to be agreed upon by the four of us. When it came to the artists, one of us would come up with an idea and then the four of us had to agree on it in order to invite an artist. If someone was not sure about an idea they could say it, and we would wait and make a final decision later on the work or a specific project. But if one of us had a big issue with inviting an artist whose work they found problematic in terms of ethics, politics or personal issues, then we wouldn't invite them, this idea would be off the table.

We each had a veto which we could use if we had a problem with an artist or an idea. The funny thing is that we never used our veto. What happened sometimes was that one of us would present an artist, then the other two

said that they really wanted to include them in the Biennale, but one of us would say "I like them, but I am a bit unsure about it. Since the three of you are convinced though, I will agree as well". But it was always very organic. Of course, you have to convince the others, explain why you think it's important to include certain positions. But it was obvious sometimes why it was important to include them or not. All in all, it was very organic.

The most interesting thing was that later we designated one of us to be the spokesperson responsible for communicating with the Biennale office regarding a specific matter or department. In the first months, before we did that, the communication with the office was crazy. What's important to remember is that we are not a collective of curators – as was the case with DIS the curators of the 9th Berlin Biennale for example who were already working as a collective – we are four individuals with four different backgrounds, four different voices, making a collective for this occasion. After that, we will again continue working independently. So, as we are not a collective and we don't have that type of training, it was very hard to communicate with the office because if someone asked the

same question to me, María, Lisette or Renata^[6], they would get different answers. Sometimes the answers were similar but there was always a point on which they differed.

But we wanted to maintain this type of communication, we wanted to have disagreements in a positive way and build something through these disagreements. This is why we decided that every decision would be made by all four of us, because if not, the final decisions would have been very different. However, each of us was responsible for one thing. For example, Renata was the spokesperson for the team in relation to exchange programs and activities. María was the spokesperson in relation to publication and texts. I was responsible for designing the website and was also the spokesperson in relation to the press. Later, Lisette and I were responsible for the exhibition design in collaboration with the architect. For example, the architect designed something that María thought was too much, and she asked me to speak with the architect about it. So I was then responsible for communicating with the architect. If we hadn't split our roles, it would have been very chaotic.

The four of us had a WhatsApp group and we emailed, but we also had to communicate with each other within the smaller groups responsible for each thing. For instance, Lisette and I were responsible for the budget, so we had to be in frequent communication about that.

Of course, communication when co-curating with four people is not easy, but that's not a bad thing, it's a challenge. On the other hand, and that is what's important for us, this Biennale would have been completely different, if I had curated it alone or if Lisette or María or Renata had curated it alone. But we are very happy with the result, and I can say that this Biennale represents me, Lisette can say that it represents her, María and Renata, too.

It's a long process. The Biennale is not only what you see here today at Gropius Bau. If you read the review written by Pablo Larios,^[7] he says something which we completely agree with; the Biennale is not only here, the Biennale is also everything that happened during the year we were at ExRotaPrint. And this is what's actually important, not the "live archive" but the real programme, experiences and people – children, group of elders, neigh-



bours etc. There was a whole process in order to make this exhibition in the end. Even though we were preparing the exhibition at the same time with everything else, we ended up changing a lot of things in response to the process. It's important to mention this, so that people don't think that the Biennale is just the exhibition, for us it's not.

CURARE participant: How did you finally decide how to use the space together with the other curators? Did you make sketches? Did you create a model?

Agustín: I have a sixteen year long experience working as the chief curator/ director of a museum. MUSAC – Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León was a 10.000 square metre museum and we used 4.000 of these for exhibitions which we were changing every three months. I was also the artistic director of MALBA in Buenos Aires, Argentina for four years. My husband is an architect and I have a very good understanding of space. Lisette curated the São Paulo Biennial — do you know how many floors this is? The Berlin Biennale is much smaller compared to it. Lisette and I have more experience working with large spaces, María has more experience working in small-

er spaces and that's why for example she was very good at working with the archive material.

The architect we worked with is called Johanna Meyer-Grohbrügge and she is very good. It was very important to work with an architect in terms of the flow between the four of us — there was someone external balancing things out.

Lisette and I wanted the design of the space to respond to the narrative of the Biennale. We wanted it to go against linear thinking, so to divide the space in a non-linear way. It was our idea and the architect loved it. The placement of the works was up to us. We knew for example that either Sandra Gamarra Heshiki's or Aline Baiana's work would go first, but Aline's work had the restriction that it had to face the South and the only wall facing South was the one we used in Gropius Bau. This was also the most difficult venue, partly because it's a museum and there are certain restrictions about what you're allowed to touch or move.

Lisette and I were designing this narration, we were composing it and then showing it to María and Renata. At the "live archive" section at ExRotaPrint, you can see the previous two installation plans, which are completely different to the final one. We had lots

of conversations both with the architect and our graphic designer about our concept, our thoughts, experiences, small details etc.

In the beginning, there were walls separating the works at Gropius Bau but then COVID-19 came and we started rethinking the architecture of the space through the following concept: how to be together but also protected? And so the walls became textile walls. Each work is in its own space (between the textiles), people can view the entire space, can see each other, recognise each other, but there is space between them.

I think this final design in the Inverted Museum at Gropius Bau is a great metaphor for the pandemic times which the Biennale is taking place in. How we can be together, see each other, feel that we are not alone just looking through the transparent canvasses, but at the same time feel that we are in a safe space in terms of safety, health, both for the people and for the works. I believe that each designed space of the epilogue of this biennial takes into account the narrative of the biennial and also the conditions of this uncertain present moment.

Agustín Pérez Rubio is an historian, art critic, and curator. He has curated numerous exhibitions at important museums, art centres, biennales, etc. mainly in Europe and Latin America. He was chief curator and director of MUSAC 2003–2013, where he organised monographic exhibitions of major artists such as Pierre Huyghe, Julie Mehretu, Dora García, Pipiloti Rist, Sejima + Nishizawa / SANAA, Elmgreen & Dragset, Harun Farocki, Ana Laura Aláez, Ugo Rondinone, and Lara Almarcegui. Later, as an independent curator, he curated solo shows by artists amongst whom SUPERFLEX, Sophie Calle, Rosangela Rennó, Carlos Garaicoa, and many group shows thematically related to gender, linguistics, architecture and politics. He has been artistic director of MALBA, Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires, since May 2014, where he developed a socio-political programme dedicated to female Latin American artists. In addition, Pérez Rubio curated together with Andrea Giunta, a new curatorial script of MALBA's collection entitled VERBOAMERICA, a postcolonial revision of the collection. He curated the Chilean Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale and was co-curator at the 11th Berlin Biennale together with Lisette Lagnado, María Berríos and Renata Cervetto.

Christina

Landbrecht

„It is wrong
to expect art
to be scientific
knowledge
production.“



künste-
rische
FORSCHUNG



NANOCARRIER
GRENZBEREICH

NANO
NANO
NANO
NANO

ERFAHRUNGS-
RAUM



PAIRING
JUNGE
Wissenschaftler: innen und
Künstler: innen arbeiten auf Augenhöhe



DIE ARBEIT
VERSELBÄNDIGT
SICH

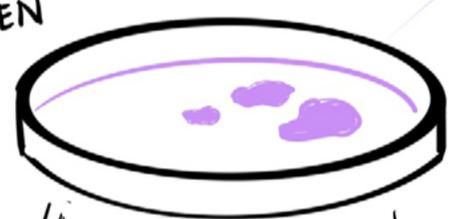
3D

MATERIAL TECHNOLOGIE

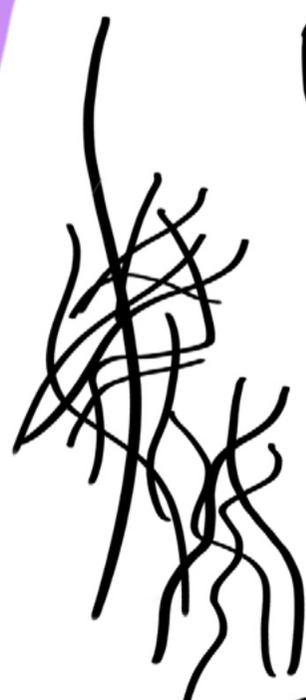
AUS DEM
DIALOG ENT-
STEHT ETWAS
GANZ ANDERES

NICHT NUR
REPRÄSENTATIV

DEN
AUSSCHNITT
SEHEN



IM LABOR SEIN
ERFAHRUNGEN



CLOSED SYSTEM?

Wissenschaft
»OBJEKTIVES
FELD«

Kunst
ÄSTHETIK



künstle-
rische
FORSCHUNG

SEMANTISCHE NÄHE
DIE BEGRIFFE AUS DER WISSENSCHAFT
ANGEEIGNET - MEINEN ABER
ETWAS ANDERES

EIGENSTÄNDIGES
WERK

A conversation about the laboratory, collaboration between artists and scientists and artistic research with Christina Landbrecht.

Fluorescent bacteria (GFP) are the protagonists of artist Susanne M. Winterling's exhibition TEMPERATE (2021) at the Ernst Schering Foundation in Berlin. In an exhibition space heated to body temperature, visitors encounter the luminescent microorganism wearing a nano-backpack making its way through human tissue, staged like a video game. The exhibition is dedicated to so-called nano-carriers, which are being researched to deliver medication to diseased tissue and thus provide valuable services in cancer therapy, to name just one example. The exhibition is the starting point for the following discussion:

Christina Landbrecht: What we just saw (ed: after having just visited the exhibition TEMPERATE), is the result of a collaboration of the artist Susanne M. Winterling and the bioengineer Simone Schürle who is a professor at ETH ("Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule" –English: Federal Institute of Technology) Zürich. During the research phase, Winterling has been given access to a field of research which is likely to affect both medical treatment and our bodies in 20 to 30 years' time. It addresses profound upheavals in medicine that will remain unknown to the general population for as long as research on

the topic is still only being carried out in the laboratory. A layperson learns little or nothing about such research, and if at all, the media first reports about it when the first person has successfully undergone such a therapy. In other words, science produces findings of fundamental social relevance, which broader society has very little chance to gain insights in until they are published and reported on. This can change, however, if an artist deals with ongoing scientific research and works with it in a way that can be experienced differently, e.g., emotionally and sensually.

Ideally, this initiates philosophical and cultural discussion around the topic. It would be wrong to take Susanne Winterling's art as simply a representation of the scientific research carried out by Schürle. I hardly believe that would be in the artist's interest. Rather, Susana's access to research that will perhaps affect us all sooner or later. The subject makes a new audience aware of this research — an audience that would otherwise never have come into contact with someone like nano-engineer Prof. Dr Simone Schürle or her laboratory.

Beyond giving access, however, I regard TEMPERATE to be one work with which Winterling further artistically explored her personal interest in topics such as bioluminescence, the relationship between humans and microorganisms, the attempt to make the latter visible, to scale them up, and to enable insights into a world unknown to us because we simply cannot experience it with our senses. Nevertheless, unlike, for example, Winterling's Glistening Troubles, a multimedia work that deals with single-celled algae, so-called dinoflagellates which can make the surface of the sea glow thanks to their bioluminescent abilities, we can hardly understand the meaning and context of TEMPERATE unless we know where it is coming from and unless we talk about Simone Schürle's experiments with microorganisms which have been equipped with a medicine backpack to function as nano-carriers and which can be guided through human tissue.

And that is also a beautiful aspect of Susanne's work: our understanding of the work benefits from us knowing about the context, about Simone Schürle's research and precisely from the fact that it comes from "being with her in the lab", as Winterling puts it. In

Schürle's laboratory, the artist has been able to make important visual experiences that could not have been made without the laboratory and the technology in it. In this respect, what we see forces me, in my position as the curator of the show, to speak about Simone and her scientific work. Besides, their collaboration and Susanne's way of working with Simone's imagery also raises new questions: "Isn't TEMPERATE ultimately also a work that talks about scientific imaging techniques?" - It certainly is. TEMPERATE is a multi-layered artwork that emerged from a genuine interest in science but does not simply depict it. Rather, the images from the laboratory help Winterling to zoom into the human body on a microscopic level. The theme of the body – and of a post-anthropocentric take on it – are thus highly relevant subjects besides the nano-carrier theme. Taking these themes up, Winterling joins a group of artists who wish to make us more aware of the existence and significance of organic entities, for example, the microbiome, algae or dust, i.e., the small organisms in our bodies or ecosystems.

CURARE participant: I work in the municipal gallery in Mitte (ed. Weißer Elefant in Berlin city centre) on Auguststraße and

also in the Bärenzwinger (English: bear pit). I have been looking into the notion of the laboratory. I simply find it very exciting when I hear about the Bärenzwinger art space, because for me, it is also a form of laboratory: the history and the architecture, the space. Right now, we are preparing an exhibition to open at the end of June, and I needed a little time in this space to see what it is, what kind of architecture there is.

And what is also exciting: if you open the flaps at the top, there are cobwebs, dust, hay and straw from the bears and other remnants. The spiders are still there and have been living in their cobwebs for ages. And I also find the nature around it very exciting. A fig tree that wouldn't actually grow in this climate at all, but somehow manages to hang on to the architecture for a long time through a kind of underground heat source of the bear's kennel. What is this place? What grows here, what lives here? How can you perhaps work with it? I find that very important. That's what surrounds us and all these intersections are very important for

creating something. If you always mow everything down and think it away, you don't get anywhere, so I find these intersections exciting. How can both learn from each other? Where are the interfaces?

Christina: It's nice that you made these observations in the Bärenzwinger and that you are so observant. I think curators who make exhibitions in one and the same space many times should be proud of knowing their space so well. They are the ones who know: "What can be done in this space? What potential does it have? How do you handle it?" As a curator, you always think you can sketch out an exhibition on a blank sheet of paper and are always surprised that this doesn't quite work out most of the time. On the contrary: at some point, you stand in the room with the works, and the space literally dictates where which object will have to be placed. In retrospect, you may even think: "My goodness, I should have known that the floor had to be carpeted."

Curating has a lot to do with experimentation, which is why I think curators are so fond of the term 'laboratory'. They identify with the term because curating is about bringing objects or

documents into a spatial constellation, and to do so is an experimental act most of the time; it's a dialogue with a place, a building, a space. This dialogue can even go beyond the exhibition space. Solvej Helweg Ovesen and I were reminded of this when working on Sissel Tolaas' exhibition called 22 – Molecular Communication. This was a double exhibition at the Ernst Schering Foundation and Galerie Wedding, and at its core was an interaction with and a research project on Müllerstraße in Berlin-Wedding. Without Müllerstraße (as empirical foundation), such an exhibition would not have been possible at all.

The Laboratory

CURARE participant: In terms of the history of science, the laboratory is a bit uninteresting for one's own practice, precisely because of its cleanliness and this failed attempt to create a laboratory situation. Because as a cultural scientist, you always want to go into the field rather than into the laboratory. You would rather conduct your research on Müllerstraße than in a social research institute for quantitative research. It's also called: SAVVY Contemporary - Laboratory of Form - Ideas. I'm also a bit heretical and think: "What is it with this laboratory? Isn't that an old concept? What is the interest in this laboratory situation, where the laboratory conditions cannot be set up, but are tinkered with?"

Christina: The concept of laboratory in contemporary art and culture is actually one that is quite broad. It is closely linked to experimentation, and its connotations range from trying things out and doing things differently on the one hand to knowledge and research on the other. These aspects, however, came only

into play with the rise of the so-called laboratory studies. Laboratory studies refer to ethnographic and anthropological investigations of the 1980s when anthropologists and sociologists examined the work processes in the laboratory with the methods of participant observation and discourse analysis and made it clear to 'us outsiders' what a laboratory actually is and what happens there. The Austrian sociologist Karin Knorr-Cetina eventually came to the conclusion that a laboratory is an artificial space through and through. According to her, the laboratory encourages researchers to reduce nature to fragments of the living world. A plant is removed from its natural environment by being taken from it and placed in a petri dish. It is cut into pieces during this action because the whole plant wouldn't even fit into the dish. So, you cut off the root and put it in one dish, while the leaf goes into another one, the flower into a third one, and so on. This means that you no longer have the plant as a plant but only separate parts of it. You then bring these parts into an environment, meaning a laboratory, where most of the parameters, such as light, temperature etc., are controlled. This way, you substitute the natural environment with an artificial, idealised one. You no longer have

an intact organism that you are examining, in its natural habitat such as a meadow or a swamp, but you have transferred it into a controlled space.

That's why when you say that cultural scientists like to go into the field, it seems plausible, because they are searching for "natural conditions" and not an idealised experimental situation.

In Susanne Winterling's *TEMPERATE*, in turn, the work would not function at all without the laboratory. Here, the focus is on the section of a cell, i.e. a tiny fragment of human tissue. This has nothing to do whatsoever with our 'normal' experience of the body. It deals with the image of living tissue that can only be conveyed to us in the laboratory and with the help of instruments that are part of the laboratory. For this view of the body and its components, we need a microscopic image. We need to look deep into the body and have the chance to do so by looking at a projection which appears monumental in space.

We need the lab to disrupt our habits of seeing, to disrupt our sense of scale. We need the laboratory in order to make microorgan-

isms visible at all, to develop an understanding of them and their capabilities and in doing so, question our anthropocentric view of the world.

Solvej Helweg Ovesen: I think the historical perspective on how exhibitions work is important. Hans Ulrich Obrist is very well known for curating the exhibition called *Laboratorium*, which brought the concept of the laboratory and the laboratory-as-exhibition model to the forefront of art and its discourses in the 1990s. It was really about moving away from the idea of a mausoleum, about involving the visitors' bodies as participants in a knowledge production process. And the term 'knowledge production' then became very central to contemporary art. The idea was that art could also generate another kind of 'a-knowledge', a type of knowledge that is not rationally provable but not useless or untrue, either. So, it corresponds to a collective knowledge that can be generated and experienced in some works of art. This idea of 'a-knowledge' (something between 'knowledge' and 'non-knowledge') emerged in the late

1990s and early 2000s and was then intensively discussed here in Germany in the context of Okwui Enwezor's *documenta 11* (2002), which Sarat Maharaj (then Rudolf Arnheim guest professor at Humboldt University Berlin) co-curated.

This classical concept of knowledge was dissolved. Suddenly you had an art history professor at Humboldt University who said: "This knowledge that you generate when you lie on the grass and look up at the sky is also knowledge." And that's just a phenomenological picture of reflection and self-relation and how you transfer your own empirical experiences in life into knowledge.

What can art do? Perhaps this can also be answered with the example of the exhibition called *22 - Molecular Communication* by Sissel Tolaas in Galerie Wedding and here at the Ernst Schering Foundation. How can you change a narrative about a street like Müllerstraße in a process that is also partly participatory, through an exhibition of local scents? Müllerstraße in the district of Wedding, Berlin, takes its name from windmills, and this wind is the main source of inspiration for Sissel

Tolaas (who is actually also a chemist). She develops the fragrances as an artist and then generates them herself as a scientist. As an artist, she wants to activate the (scent) story of Berlin's industrialisation through scents carried by wind, some of which she also recorded in Müllerstraße, and then steer back the narrative to windmills, wind energy and history.

She commissioned a writer, Lauren van Vuuren, who did these precipitations (quick dives into the local history, some rather fictional) in the history of Wedding. They were on the gallery wall as narratives, but were then suddenly in the space as well by means of different scents activated by sensors in the urban space. This exhibition was an ever-changing situation (different smells in the space etc.) where you always experienced something different. And in principle, you can then associate either sweat, or soap or a chemical product like camphor with this street (because of the nearby Bayer industrial plant) but create a completely different view, perhaps also of history. And it then becomes very individually targeted when you look at an exhibition.

But who would define that as a goal if it wasn't an interdisciplinary communication exercise? Here at the Ernst Schering Foundation, there was the classic laboratory with lots of bottles and fragrances, where everything was about what the nose can decipher. And about the importance of scent as a means of orientation and as an alternative form of seeing. And that is emphasised in its use, as a kind of orientation in the ecological situation we live in. Perceptual situations that also create other narratives about our material world and history can be generated collectively when you allow this open space, art as a laboratory. It is important that there is not one particular narrative in an exhibition, but rather to allow for this research to nurture possible non- or a-knowledge.

Artistic Research

Christina: One has indeed successively transferred the concept of research into contemporary art since the end of the 1990s. The adoption of the terms 'laboratory' and 'experiment' in the art discourse is closely related to this. I would strongly doubt whether all these terms really have anything to do with how they are used in science, but it is undeniable that they were chosen because artistic and also curatorial practice was meant to be recognised as a form of producing 'another knowledge'. Whereby, of course, it has been discussed that the use of those terms has caused difficulties, because they have been linked with specific semantic fields that have been associated with science for centuries. Yet, as Solvej says, the term 'research' in the arts, in fact, refers to counter-knowledge or even anti-knowledge. In the case of Obrist's concept of laboratory, this anti-attitude becomes vivid in a curatorial sense of the word. His [Laboratorium](#)^[1], an exhibition he curated with Barbara Vanderlinden, was supposed to literally question the conventions of the museum on the one hand and those of the dichotomy of art and science on the other. In the central exhibition space, the catalogue

was produced during the exhibition period, and the whole exhibition was primarily designed to be a participatory event and a process rather than some kind of inspection of images.

This exhibition turned the museum into a laboratory and the exhibition into an experiment. The latter can be stressed even more, as the curators attempted to bring the practices of art and science into a productive dialogue by way of looking at the working modes rather than the results. The idea for this was based on a thesis by the art historian Caroline Jones and the historian of science Peter Galison, who in their book "Picturing Science, Producing Art", published in 1998, stated that although the products of the two disciplines would differ fundamentally from each other, a look at the practice would reveal some commonalities. In my opinion, the merging of the worlds of art, science and the frequent use of the term 'research' began in those years, in 1998-1999, when these texts were written, and [Laboratorium](#) was presented.

Today, however, people are much more critical of such a crossover. The semantic proximity of the term 'artistic research' with 're-

search' and knowledge production has been intensively discussed for more than a decade, by Tom Hohlert among others, a curator, author and lecturer, who deplores the choice of the term 'research' in art. After all, 'research' by definition means an activity that produces an increase in knowledge. But must or should an artist produce new knowledge? Do artists have to supply the world with innovations? Perhaps there are rare cases where art and science collaborations lead to new findings that might eventually even result in the filing of a new patent. That is completely legitimate, but it would be a completely wrong expectation of an artist. And this is precisely the reason why research in art should mean something different to the meaning the term 'research' has in science. Artistic research should, for example, be regarded as a way of shaking certainties and taking a new, bold look at what we thought was true.

Finally, let's turn to what motivates us at the Ernst Schering Foundation: We are interested in the concept of artistic research for one thing. Yet, the Foundation's core interest is to encourage transdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration between scientists and artists. The Foundation helps to support and

initiate works by artists who want to interact and work with scientists. Ideally, the results of their work are of interest to very different groups of people. We are more than happy if they are seen by people from both the arts and the sciences, i.e., if a biomedical scientist comes to the exhibition and says: "Yes, of course, that's nano-carrier research". And someone else with a background in art or cultural history has completely different associations and is interested in Winterling's visual language.

For me, the most interesting thing about an exhibition like this is the fact that it can appeal to different people from various backgrounds. And that it works on both an aesthetic level, a perceptual level, and a body level, as well as talking to someone interested in the research carried out in the natural sciences.

But that's not the only reason why it's so interesting to work at Ernst Schering Foundation: at the moment, it's extremely exciting to work at the interface between art and science because of the current situation we find ourselves in, i.e. global problems like climate change, the melting of the ice caps, the thawing of the permafrost and the pollution of the

oceans, literally forces those artists who are interested in such topics to take an interest in science.

But in order to be able to conduct this dialogue well as an artist, you have to learn how to deal with the equipment and data of science and, beyond that, with the scientists themselves. Susanne Winterling's TEMPERATE is a very good example of how you can appropriate the images of science artistically. She has worked her way into the imaging software that Simone Schürle uses in her laboratory, because she really wanted to transfer the three-dimensional images of cell slices that Simone sees through her microscope into the exhibition space. She aims to make this image of the body's inside, as it can be generated with the help of the latest imaging technology in the sciences, accessible to everyone. Susanne has meticulously studied both the material and the technology.

In a similar way, artists like Sissel Tolaas use the tools and knowledge provided by chemistry to concoct scents from molecules. The processes and ways of dialogue and collaboration may vary from one project to the next one, but the beauty is that this kind of collabo-

ration always results in something that gives us new perspectives and insights into highly complex issues and brings forth sensory artworks that are based on an intense process of research and artistic-scientific exchange.

Christina Landbrecht is the director of the art programme at the Schering Stiftung, Berlin, since 2018. Born in Munich, she moved to Berlin to study art history and business administration at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. She subsequently worked as curatorial assistant at the Berlinische Galerie – Museum of Modern Art, where she later took the position of assistant to the director, Dr. Thomas Köhler. Her research and work is concerned with the influence of the natural sciences on contemporary art. More specifically, she investigates artistic practices and exhibition strategies that draw inspiration from natural scientific methods and working environments, such as the laboratory, and uses these as the basis for creative work. Her objective is to critically examine works, exhibitions and production conditions.

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