

PLATFORMS OF RELATIONS

(An attempt to write a story)

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LOCATION: CAFÉ HU¹ *I speak in my broken German again and I'm meanwhile thinking if anybody understand what am I trying to say or... they are just tolerating me? They are very polite they are just smiling at me!*

People have been gathered in a newly open space at the ground floor in one of the former apartments overlooking Brunnenplatz, which has been changed into a public facility - a Café, painted in very bright colours. *Wonderful, very special, crazy!* - I invited a friend of mine, Mari Rantanen, a finish painter, living in Sweden to work with me on the design of the Café. We had our first painting action at the end of July. All done for fun – with hours of voluntary work, as cheap as possible, but still looking good! However, with a very serious concept in mind: to help Matthias Köllmann (3) to create a place for meeting and work, a platform that would possibly generate jobs in economically devastated neighbourhood where no private investment could survive.

This idea of opening up the ground floor spaces into the public square with facilities serving the neighbourhood that would make the square more alive has came out from very many discussions that we had in our Aktionsteam². We suggested to VBW (main housing corporation in Hustadt) to change the addresses of those spaces by the name of the square which hasn't been "on the map" until now however it exist since the 70'. So we got Brunnenplatz 1 (which is the address of our future Communiti(es) Pavilion), we have got Brunnenplatz 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, etc. ; spaces on the ground floor suited for public services open to the main square.

The new Café HU address is: Brunnenplatz 8; my studio / apartment is: Brunnenplatz 11

"Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Neighbours, dear Guests, this is going to be a new Café in Hustadt! But not a kind of Café that you are used to visit in the city, no, this will be a work place, a meeting place, a discussion space or a lecture room...which can be rented out for meetings and workshops, birthday parties, serving the needs of the neighbourhood. It will be rented out for a small fee just that Matthias Köllmann³, who will run the place, can pay the rent. The idea is to develop a place, which would use the potential of Hustadt, being the world in small. I meet women in Hustadt who can make the best Falafels, Labne, home made Hummous, Makaneek, Kaftas, Balklawas, just name it and who could use their skills and knowledge with-in Café HU project. There are other people in Hustadt with other talents and knowledge that other places would not have, which makes Hustadt special. The Café HU can become a place where all those potentials could develop further and possibly make better your own future as well as the future of Hustadt!"

¹ Café HU is a derivate of an art project – named Hustadt Project, which I have started in September 2008.

² The Aktionsteam was formed from people living in the neighbourhood who were supporting the project I proposed. The Aktionsteam has been formed as a loos network of individuals who are concerned about their own place where they live. The number of people in the team has varied and their motivations have been very different.

³ Matthias Köllman is a social activist who joined the Aktionsteam in March 2009 and has been working on our project in Hustadt since then. He is very aware of the social role of the project as well as of its economical risk that he is taking on his shoulder however he never really thought it is going to be that hard!

PLATFORMS

Hustadt Project is a process ... and a series of projects taking place in Hustadt, Bochum (Ruhr Area, Germany). As a process it is composed of several parts: the research of the existing situation that includes many formal and informal meetings, discussions, and workshops with people living in Hustadt. Out of this research the aim was to create the conditions for public participation (parallel to an official participatory urban planning process) and together with a group of inhabitants make a suggestion that can influence and definitely shift the official planning proposal for Hustadt.

The whole process has been leading into the drafting of a proposal for a Community Pavilion – Brunnenplatz 1 – a meeting place for people living in Hustadt; to encourage them to act and re-act on present conditions, outside of official social institutions, to create a place by themselves and for themselves. The Community Pavilion – Brunnenplatz 1 is a network of activities suggested by inhabitants themselves: a summer kitchen, a seating place, a small performance stage, an outdoor cinema, a bicycle-repair workshop, and much more. The goal is to create a place that would generate and inspire everybody living in the neighborhood. (<http://www.hustadtproject.blogspot.com/>)

I have been invited to work on a participatory art project for the site in Hustadt, by Galerie m and the city of Bochum. This was a very unusual context for my work, which has usually been produced by various art institutions and festivals and not commissioned by the city authorities directly. However, I'm very much interested in relationship between cultural politics and its influence on urban development, creating projects that would challenge both the commissionaire and the public however create a dialog with the existing situation. It is not only the geographical location or even architectural physical setting that would interest me but just as well social and political situation, people living on the site and their relationship with their own place. Therefore, my reason to except this invitation has to do with the challenge of the place itself and the potential that I could see to provoke certain clichés within the art world as well as within the hidden agendas behind this official invitation.

The art world of today would understand this invitation as very un-fancy, problematic, or even wrong; a kind of invitation that could jeopardise an artist integrity and lead into instrumentalisation. Artists have been too many times used and abused within various political agendas especially when they act outside of the usual art context (not to mention with-in the art context itself!). However, it is known by now that artist and art spaces are one of the leading forces of gentrification within run-down urban areas even when they are not commissioned for the task. But is it possible, as being aware of its own role, to act constructively: create a platform within the art project to negotiate the space for dialog, and inform people living in the area about the processes they are confronted with? Or will this kind of act again just serve into definition that Grant Kester ever described as: an "aesthetic evangelist" working at the hands of conservative history⁴. The task is not easy! Especially when even in your own professional field the critic produced generalize and create deconstructive pre-conceptions about the possible changing artist's role working beyond the art institution.

I had an idea that by the way I'm setting my position as an artist working in relation to the specific place and in relation to this specific situation and public I would be able to place my activity as a quotidian activity in relation to other professions or professionals dealing with the same questions and topics. Therefore, I was really interested in influencing the process of regeneration as an artist living with-in the neighbourhood, became a member of the team

⁴ Grant Kester, *"Aesthetic evangelists: conversation and empowerment in contemporary community, Afterimage, Jan. 1995*

working on the project for the urban renewal. But let me be clear: I had no desire to re-present anybody but myself!

At the beginning of the process I was wondering if anybody would listen to me, would anybody take me seriously when I would be critical to the process and suggest something that they would have a hard time to except? Would I be able to maintain my critical position and defend my own ideas and not the one of the publics, or the one of the politicians however cooperating and discussing the process with both of them? I wanted to see how much "space for resistance" is there allowed for me as an artist to use within the process of developing a project. As an artist I would be the only one who would re-present an independent and therefore possibly critical position.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CITY BUREAUCRATS

But is the critical position expected or wanted when an artist gets an invitation for a project within the urban re-generation program? Is the commissioner – in this case the city bureaucratic body – really interested and aware of the autonomous position of the artist? Do they care at all? Is the art project just one of many projects that has to be included into the re-development program because of a specific politics? Do they know how to produce the art project, how to deal with it how to maintain the results of the project weather based on an art object or the relationships that the project produced?

However, it is still not very usual to include artist into an urban development team. They might be just too unpredictable. Their behaviour is just too unusual and might produce counter reaction. Nobody wants conflicts especially not in processes which has a time / budget limitation.

Hustadt project has been limited to 9 months however due to very many complications and misunderstandings with the commissioner – the city of Bochum, its time became longer and longer. It is interesting that the kind of problems we were dealing with has at the end after lots of effort produced a positive result. In this case the conflicts created hopefully something interesting. The project is taking already two and a half years and it is still not finished; we hope to open the Community Pavilion in September 2011.

My proposal for the project was obviously unexpected (unpredictable); it was interesting for the city of Bochum but extremely risky as well. After half a year of discussion the city officials decided to take the risk to deep into a pool of unpredictable situations. However, they didn't think about consequences and many questions and situations that the whole process of the project meanwhile produced. I guess they were not aware of the fact that contemporary art production also within the public art genre has taken its shifts and develop its discipline as an answer to the contemporary situation.

RELATIONS

The production of art as well as public art has taken its many shifts in the last 40 years or more, from producing artefacts into the production of relations, from creating a product into developing an openended process. It is clear that artist today can take many different positions which all are relevant and can produce a relevant results: from the artist who is still committed to the production of an aesthetic art object to the role of the artist as a mediator, or perhaps service provider where the theoretical concept plays a mayor role.

We can clearly follow this development of art production through out the history. According to the art historian and critic Grant H. Kester, socially engaged and critical art practices during the 1960s and 1970s 'often focused on an internal critique of the work of art, [which they

expanded] into a set of positive practices directed towards the world beyond the gallery walls, linking new forms of intersubjective experience with social or political activism.¹

Artist has been developing their work from the critic of the “white cube” – institutional critic into the site-specific projects. The latest shift within contemporary public art has been described by Miwon Kwon as a shift from the site to community, or the conversion of community into a site. And therefore, the questions concerning the role of the artist, the public function of art, and the definition of community are given new urgency⁶. Drawing on a detailed analysis of the highly acclaimed 1993 community - based public art exhibition “Culture in Action: New Public Art in Chicago” curated by Mary Jane Jacobs, as a case study Miwon Kwon questions a presumption of aesthetic radicalism, public accessibility, audience empowerment, social relevance, and democracy that support such practice.⁷

The 1993 presentation of “Culture in Action” thus exemplified on a grand scale what Suzanne Lacy defined as “new genre public art”. Dealing with some of the most profound issues of our time – toxic waste, race relations, homelessness, aging, gang warfare, and cultural identity – a group of visual artist has developed distinct models for an art whose public strategies of engagement are an important part of its aesthetic language...We might describe this as “new genre public art” to distinguish it in both forms and intention from what has been called “public art” – a term used for the past twenty-five years to describe sculpture and installations sited in public places. Unlike much of what heretofore been called public art, new genre public art – visual art that uses both traditional and non-traditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives – is based on engagement.⁸

Miwon Kwon is trying to re-think the site specificity once again. She would critically examine site specificity not exclusively as “an artistic genre but as a problem-idea, as a peculiar cipher of art and spatial politics. In addition to providing analysis and theorization of the various artistic (re)configurations of site specificity and re-evaluating the rhetoric of aesthetic vanguardism and political progressivism associated with them, the book situates the questions concerning the sitting of art as a spatio-political problematic.”⁹

“Culture in Action” affirmed Lacy’s claim that “what exists in the space between the words PUBLIC and ART is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may itself be the artwork.”¹⁰ However that specific relationship between the artist and the audience, where the audience is asked to take an active role is a product of time, of development that can only be shaped within a process. The process would usually take a form of a project; a form that is not necessarily materialized within a single object. It creates perhaps many different forms of communication; many different platforms for relationships. As Lacy might be wondering about the new definition for the “unknown relationship between artist and audience”¹⁰ where the single art object is losing its significant role being reduced /

⁵ Kester, Grant H. *Conversation Pieces. Community + Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 9.

⁶ Kwon, Miwon. *One Place after the Another; Site specific art and local identity*. (Cambridge, MA, London, UK: The MIT press, 2002), p. 2

⁷ *ibid*, p.6

⁸ *Ibid.*, p104, 105

⁹ *Ibid.*, p2

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p105

de-materialized into a relationship, Nicolas Bourriaud, later in the day, try to analyze the new condition within his book "Relational Aesthetic"¹¹.

He talks about art as a social interstice¹² – a possibility of a relational art (an art that takes its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and symbolic space) is testimony to the radical upheaval in aesthetic, cultural and political objectives brought about by modern art. To outline this sociology: this development steams essentially from the birth of a global urban culture and the extension of the urban model to almost all cultural phenomena.¹³ Here we should look back to the early 1970s again and re-examine the history; there has been individual artists who would pursue their social engagement and develop processes within art context, which would be directed to the public and with the public. For example Stephen Willats who's aim is to "transform peoples' perceptions of a deterministic culture of objects and monuments, into the possibilities inherent in the community between people, the richness of its complexity and self-organisation"¹⁴. Willats would in many of his works refer to behaviourism within every day social reality that might take place in his neighbourhood. He would take a role of a contemporary anthropologist and researcher and create a specific social encounter with his audience via questioners and talks. His immediate environment would serve as a context and material for his work.

It seems that the city became as the main generator of the new social change that has influenced and defined the art practices in the 90' as Bourriaud describes within his definition of relational aesthetics: "The city permits and generalizes the experience of proximity: this is the tangible symbol and historical framework of the state of society, or the 'state of encounter,' that has been 'imposed' on people".¹⁵ However he as an exhibition maker (curator and co-director of Palais de Tokyo from 1999 to 2006 – exhibition space for contemporary art in Paris) would mainly refer to the art works produced and presented within the exhibition context, from the situations of encountering the city and life in the city. That kind of position provide very comfortable and protected situation for the artist and the curator since they communicate usually with "the convinced", with fairly informed audience, interested in contemporary art, interested to get involved and active.

The relational art can function as a relational device in different moments of its production and presentation. For example Annika Eriksson takes the real situations and social interactions and place them into the center of project-oriented and performative art since the early 1990s. The participants, or rather those who are portrayed, act within an artificial and playful frame provided by the artist, in which the 'free speech' of each action takes possession of the exhibition space in a largely autonomous manner. She would mainly produce intensive moments of participation during the production of her work since the display of the work would result in a video or installation within an exhibition space. Other

¹¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon-Quetigny: les presses du réel, 2004), translated by Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods, Mathieu Copeland from *Esthétique Relationnelle*, 1996.p.1

Besides Lacy and Bourriaud there has been other attempts to frame socially engaged art practices like : Suzy Gablik's 'connective aesthetics', Grant Kester's 'dialogical art', the so-called 'kontext kunst' coined by Peter Weibel, not to forget Beuys with his idea of "social sculpture"

¹² The term interstice was used by Karl Marx to describe trading communities that escaped the framework of the capitalist economy: barter, selling at a loss, autarkic forms of production, and so on. An interstice is a space in social relations, which, although it fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, suggests possibilities for exchanges other than those that prevail within the system.

¹³ www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/.../Readings/BourriaudRA.pdf, Nicolas Bourriaud, Excerpts from *Relational Aesthetics*, 1998

¹⁴ <http://stephenwillats.com/context>

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.1

artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija would create various moments of conviviality within the exhibition space itself. He has broken every rule of expected behaviour in a gallery with his installation *Untitled 1992 (Free)* when he emptied out the office of the 303 Gallery in Soho, NY and installed a makeshift kitchen, complete with fridge, hot plates, rice steamers, tables, and stools. He then cooked Thai curry; anyone could drop in, serve him- or herself, and eat. For free. On the other hand, Elin Wikström would develop her projects that are placed within a public domain outside of an exhibition space. She would construct situations that would interrupt the flow of everyday life and force the re-thinking of acceptance of various codes of behaviour, value systems and social conditioning. Her work would mainly result into a performance in public space, which would generate incidental relations to the public.

Those artworks are having a dynamic, interactive social function. The works of artists I mentioned above bring into play modes of social exchange, interaction with the viewer inside the aesthetic experience he or she is offered, and processes of communication in their concrete dimensions as tools that can be used to bring together individuals and groups. They therefore all work within what we might call the relational sphere. That kind of atmosphere is on one hand very generous to the public on the other hand it might confuse the public. The offer (or demand) for the upheaval change of their behaviour within a specific context (art context) can be quite dramatic and therefore not expected and in many ways rejected as not art.

Nevertheless, the artists mentioned above have been a great influence to the generation in coming not only artists but just as well to others working in a wide field of sociability. Wanting or not, Bourriaud and his contemporaries, might have been abused as a protagonists-of-the-kind of activity that they would not want to produce? It is as Bourriaud would be describing something that he has not yet seen. Nowadays the idea of relational aesthetic that would seemingly provide a theoretical background for the relational art is used by other practices as well, which employ participation processes, or moments of social encounter.

Hustadt project has been produced beyond the art institutional context; it has been a commission from the city of Bochum, but it turned into self-organized action driven neighbourhood project. As I already said the project has grown beyond its conventional art ambition, very much based on a production of various platforms of relationships among very many different individuals and groups. The public that is participating within Hustadt project is very various. Therefore, it was necessary to develop different modes of encouraging participation, which would address different groups to engage in the project. Aktionsteam is with me from the beginning; this is a network of individuals that would help this project to overcome all possible troubles and barriers created with in the process. They are local and they know the local politics very well so they would help me to negotiate along the process. But there would also be individuals who could not associate themselves with the Aktionsteam but would get involved within some parts of the project. The project involved many kids living in Hustadt, together with social organizations that are operating with-in Hustadt. It's necessary to point out that there is not only one identified Hustadt community; there are many, very different groups of people that would vary by age, race, cultural background, education, motivation...I hate to talk about multicultural neighbourhood since the term is too un-precise and doesn't say anything but just categorize the place within the known "clichés" of problematic, socially deprived places. It is true that the neighbourhood, which has been built in the 60' as "Universitätsstadt" is nowadays economically very weak, there are too many people living from social security who have hard time to see their future. The neighbourhood has all attributes to fill in the myth of the ghetto, which is a cultural and political construct that has a distinct historical emergence and development in public

discourse. However Hustadt project was trying to embrace the complexity of life in the neighbourhood and create a possibility for various platforms that could be generating different cultural activities for the variety of actors: a summer cinema with a program of different films, poster wall to be used for actual poster actions for people to say what they would like to say in public, blackboard to create school workshops and drawing actions, stage for different music and theatre performances, garden to plant various eatable plants which are used in different kitchens around the world etc.

The project itself demands an intensive interactivity and participation. It requires to be taken care of, not only as a public place but just as well a place for activities, and relations that has to be maintained. The Hustadt project is not temporary project but a project in a process that should last for a while and develop relationship with the place and the people living in the neighbourhood. Therefore, it needs intensive support and engagement. I could only wish that this project would generate a desire for people getting involved and taking care of. That this project would possibly generate new reality, new believes in the future for many in Hustadt as well as for some of them to create platforms where they could start their own existence. That has already started to happen. I would expect that the city authorities and housing corporations in the neighbourhood would be able to understand this project as a generator of a better life for people who are already living in Hustadt. Therefore, they should start supporting those who are trying to continue what the Hustadt project has began. They should understand that what this project has created is not an art object but several relational platforms that need to be maintained and continued. The fact is that everybody, people living in Hustadt as well as the city and housing corporations will benefit from it. The sustainable participation can only happen when all the actors are involved, running a constructive and continues dialog.¹⁶

I think they understand me! I did improve my German a bit, living here in Hustadt for almost 3 years. They look at me and they smile. It will be a hard work. Ayla, Rola, Niemat, Newzad, Shyraz,...they are all here, ready to start! Inshallah.

¹⁶ UmQ (University meets Querenburg, Association for Street Culture), a non – profit organization lead by Philip Unger & Rolf Haarmann, members of Aktionsteam has taken responsibility for running the Community Pavilion.