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The artist as curator in the network of contemporary art institutions
Private Nationalism / on the margins of an arts project

DLA dissertation
– Thesis –

The writing of the dissertation has given me the chance, amongst others, to reflect on and to formulate the theoretical questions behind the project. In a strange way, this theoretical basis gave me, in hindsight, a certain legitimate.

The basis for my experiments was the series of exhibitions called *Private Nationalism Project*, of which I am the initiator and main organizer. The Project served as a Central and Eastern European medical report, and attempted to circumambulate the phenomenon of nationalism. At the beginning of the project, in January 2014, private nationalism as such was a symptom bogged down with contradictions, but also had an obvious actuality. As I was writing this dissertation, however, another, much more direct phenomenon was becoming more dominant: one that transcends the private sphere: *everyday nationalism*. It is thus clear that the *raison d'être* and actuality of the Project are apparent, but the question is not simply whether we can grasp its actuality with the aid of contemporary visual arts. I also find it important that we see what an overburdened heritage and encrusted habits were necessary for an exhibition such as *Private Nationalism Project* to be born.

New Institutionalism

The essential/basic objective of *New Institutionalism* (Doherty, 2012. Pp. 303.), published since the second half of the Nineties, was to enable participation for each and every actor in the field of fine arts. Interactivity puts an end to passive, consumption-based reception of art, and gives rise to a dialogical relationship between works of art, arts professionals and visitors. This sentiment, according to *Prior* (2012), is in harmony with the postmodern expectation which transcends the satisfaction of the receiver's needs stemming from old institutional conventions, and the requirements set against the visitors: it is a moral guidance, and its cathartic experiencing through aesthetical experience.

According to *Doherty* (2012), the time of conventional structured exhibition programmes is over. The question, however cannot be decided: is the re-structuring of the traditional institutional programme a result of striving to change the attitude of visitors? Or did, indeed, the exhibition programmes offered by institutions, change as a result of altered visitors' habits? According to *Stallabrass* (2012), the compulsion of positioning within a country, and regional competition have also played a great role in the change of institutions' approaches. Furthermore, the pattern of spending one's free time has also undergone changes; visiting a museum has exited the weary role of compulsory school activities. On one hand, this is due to the spread of museum pedagogical activities, which aim to educate youth and adults sensitive to art into a discerning audience for fine arts by offering experience-based, interactive solutions. On the other hand, the various forms of cooperation between institutions can bring about the birth of new forms of patterns of spending one's free time.

As *Miwon Kwon* (2012) puts it: „*Being specific means to decipher and re-write institutional conventions...*” (pp. 107). This means that certain museums and galleries choose varying segments of fine art as an object of their exhibitions, and they mediate these through communicational channels they had established to the larger public and the professionals. However, the more specific characteristics of an institution are set before choosing the object of the exhibitions, so this choice is but an important component of a larger institutional strategy.

From the Nineties on, a certain penchant for experimentation has spread in curatorial concepts, which was realised in the organisation of group exhibitions. The institutions dissolved the borders of the fine arts scene, and started to realise their programmes with the inclusion of the humanities (sociology, history, psychology) primarily. In this changed context, a new way of parlance on fine arts started to take a foothold: „Theoreticians and artists started to elaborate theoretic and visual forms of expression” (*Marion von Osten*, 2012., pp 300).

Notwithstanding the incorporation of local activities, a programme also has to deal with international trends/currents and international participants – it is only thus that points of reference may be drawn up. “Contemporary art – as may be seen – is an unavoidably societal, political category; and it is near-compulsory for it to reach across borders (*Gábor Ébli*, 2011., pp 40)

In new Institutionalism, the formation of a public / community plays an important role. However, it is inexpedient and not necessary to educate a public that's capable of reflection simply from the point of view of entertainment. *Péter György* (2003) points out in his work „*The erased*

space: the Museum” that the interactivity that stems from the strengthening of the entertaining function „*expects or presupposes less dialouge*” (pp 139.).

The artist as... , the curator as.... .

From the Eighties and Nineties on, the artistic practice of artists has undergone a gradual change, so that their practice did not „only” cover the creation of aesthetical objects (see Miwon Kwon, 2012.). First, the artists started to analyse their own works, after the critical discourses aimed at their art have lost steam. This disappointment led to the birth of artists’ interviews, which filled a gap and formed a theoretical and philosophical basis for the analysis of works of art and the artists’ oeuvres. Through these published conversations the artists, as a rule, stepped into the role of mediators. In the second step, they started undertaking projects of ever-larger scale. Apart from taking on the role of curator, artists have nowadays started exerting a significant critical activity, and may even take a stand in discourses of art history.

Curators have gradually taken over the role of critics which „*brings about a convincing formulation of values, a rhetoric which itself creates credible values. Through this the curatorial role has re-formed the economy of formulating an opinion in the artistic fields in question*” (Mick Wilson, 2012., pp 319.). However, the birth of the rhetorics of creating values is not the only function that this dominance has brought with itself. The whole spectrum of curatorial activity has been broadened, and has become a collective creative process based on co-operation. It is obvious that the responsibility arising from this takes varying shapes based on the individual nature of the projects.

The role of curator can, at the same time be centralised and polarised. In the previous instance, it is a person who risks his or her professional reputation, and takes responsibility for everything, starting from the curatorial concept, through liaising with artists, and the planning the exhibition to the last detail, and successfully promoting it. Of course this does not mean that the curator performs this all single-handedly.

The authoritarian solution is more prevalent in projects of a smaller scale, and it is this version which is used in public institutions, since an institution is an organisation based on considerably more hierarchic principles. In the case of the polarised curatorial role, there are two or more curators sharing

the task, and everyone is responsible for his/her section of the programme. This is all laid down in the preparatory phase of the project. This approach is more common in bottom-up artistic associations, where the democratic approach is more prevalent. Such a curatorial role can be better implemented in the organisation of large-scale projects – a series of exhibitions and accompanying events - and biennales.

The polarisation of the curatorial role was a necessary step. If we take the creation of dialogue-based critical discourses as a constant slogan of contemporary arts, then this cannot be realised through an authoritarian approach. The dissolution of this authority is not merely a conceptual gesture, along the lines of which artistic projects may be occasionally realised, but is a factor that warrants the authenticity of a project. Whatever role one may take in today's fine arts universe, if they want to start a dialogue or take part in it, this may not be done merely on a democratic basis.

The critique of the role of curator

The idea of the curator as “meta artist” has gradually been incorporated into the practice of fine arts. Critics often point out that a curator-centred approach distracts from the works of art themselves. So that the works are nothing more but artistic products which are chosen based on an arbitrary concept. The exhibitions themselves, as short-lived events of a performative nature do not, in themselves enable the long-term aesthetical evaluation of works of art.

During large-scale biennales and projects, neither the public nor the professionals remember the exhibiting artists, they remember the curators. It may be stated also that this way the true potential of artists cannot emerge. Furthermore, during the archiving of exhibitions, presenting the works of art is not of primary importance; they are merely illustrations next to the lengthy studies and essays of theoreticians. The texts written by theoretical professionals is, fundamentally, an expression of this role and that of a professional-theoretical foundation hidden behind the individual concepts. (see *Paul O'Neil*, 2012.).

If the analyzing and interpreting text can reach the professionals and an audience with a sensitivity and an openness to fine arts, then they are wholly validated, since they have the capacity to induce dialogue. In the opposite case, it is a hazy, theoretical and self-centred approach that predominates, so that a critique of curatorial activities becomes valid. Furthermore, critique would be entirely justified if the artists would be absolutely cut off from the possibility of being curators themselves, or take a stance, utter an opinion in art theoretical questions. Due to the permeability of

roles however, artists themselves may become curators. In the new millennium one may observe the strengthening of a professional discourse in which artists may become active members of the theoretical sphere. This striving is also necessary, since the curatorial role is partly based on artistic practice. This way the curatorial role can only remain flexible and innovative during the elaboration of concepts if the integration of the artists is constantly ensured.

The private charm of nationalism

Gellner offers us a definition of nationalism which transcends the borders of a state or that of a culture. His starting point is that, after the members of a society have acquired the cultural goods determined by the state - that is, they have acquired a common cultural code system -, they do not need the state to define their attitude towards culture. Within this freedom to reflect, the citizen decides for him- or herself, which unique cultural code system they wish to live in – not forgetting of course the common, learned code system – and is, naturally, able to decide how to relate to his or her own nation.

Gellner calls this “the taming of nationalism”. This theory, taking into account the practical realization of nationalism, is a utopian state. This theory, taking into account the practical realization of nationalism, is a utopian standing. In this case nationalism appears to members of society not as a community experience any more, but is realised within the individual, thus becoming an exclusive private affair, such as sexuality. Gellner observes the presence of this nationalism first and foremost in established Western democracies. It is questionable, however, whether nationalism can be disconnected from community as such, since it is exactly belonging to a community that meant the true strength/power of nationalism. Does not the classification of nationalism into the private sphere constitute a danger of the same magnitude as nationalism which is realized on a social level? Is individual reflectivity the condition of the birth of private nationalism?

The phenomenon of private nationalism can, however be just as dangerous as nationalism materializing in communities, since it exists invisibly, in the subconscious of the citizens – Edit Andrés sees it hiding “under one’s skin”. The materialization of nationalism in a private sphere brings with it, on one hand the democratic possibility which Gellner has expressed. Due to its everyday nature, and due to its invisibility, it carries with itself the danger of being exposed/of defencelessness, since what is private is always more defenceless/exposed, and what is more exposed can be easily exploited, or readily manipulated. Today, the most obvious tool for this is visibility, as Edit Andrés has pointed out

in her study (2014). Nationalism has always relied on visual forms. This mode of expression, on one hand brings with it and utilises a code system which renders the nationalist idea easily consumable for the beholder.

On the other hand, this visual representation with its own physical manifestation is capable of labelling the individual acting as beholder. Identification – which has given the mythical illusion of belonging together, and the unremitting rebirth and development of the nation for the beholder – carries with it the possibility that the beholder becomes an active part of all this. As opposed to the rejection of this – nationalist – visual form, and the application of a critical attitude (which, in this case brings with it the stigma of being an alien, or even that of endangering the nation.

The realization of the project

The Private Nationalism Project was an international artistic and cultural series of events which is organised through the co-operation of eight institutions from six countries, an international group of curators and artists from the Central and Eastern European region and its environs. Since the nature of nationalism varies in each country, instead of a ready-made and uniform travelling exhibition, the Project entailed exhibitions that took the local context into consideration to reflect on the phenomenon of „private nationalism”. Even if the exhibitions are based on largely the same works of art reflecting on the artists’ home countries’ problems, in each of the exhibition spaces the stress was on different aspects or geopolitical regions, through which it can reflect on its immediate environment, or its border zones.

Due to the exhibitors, various subregions are brought up into the focus of examination, various local problems, conflicts, political tensions and minority problems are scrutinised. Apart from shedding light on conflicts and problems, the historical tradition of cross-border transnational relationships; the various cross-inseminating processes also emerge into the light. The collaboration of artists of various nationalities suggests the possibility and vision of peaceful co-existence, even if this is contrary to the aspirations of high politics.

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