

Bojana Piškur:
Art in Becoming

I would like to thank Jože Barši, friend and artist, who in numerous discussions pointed out to me the unexplored potential of ideas/concepts of stupidity, ridiculousness, laziness in art and their possibilities for subversive actions, or, in other words, their potential to create problems and tensions instead of pointing at them. This makes me optimistic and hopeful that a utopian dimension has not yet been lost in art. I'll start with some questions that could be used in the discussion later on.

What is the current discourse on engaged art practices all about? Does art today exist outside the political sphere? Has its political emancipatory potential failed or simply become commodified? Why is this kind of art so unproblematic once it enters the art system? Why has it not had any major impact on disrupting the current neoliberal ways of operating despite the fact that it is regularly on the museum's exhibition agenda? Why is it quite acceptable for these art practices to be supported by the big corporations and even to participate in the competitive market logic? Last but not least, why has this kind of art become so predictable, why has it become so boring?

The relationship between aesthetics and political engagement in contemporary art is still far from decided. There are conflicts intrinsically present in both that disclose mutual contradictions. The tension these conflicts generate remains the same but the structure keeps changing in line with the changes in social relations.¹ In 1925 George Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde wrote that art should be useful and that the criteria for artworks could only be their social impact, social usefulness and effectiveness. We are also familiar with the discussion between Benjamin and Adorno on committed art and Adorno's influential essay "Commitment" (1962) in which he claims that only autonomous art

possesses critical power. What he was saying and what we have experienced is that political and critical art can easily be appropriated and used by the power systems. Put differently, the spheres of economy and politics can easily colonise art. But does that only apply to the forms of representation? Suely Rolnik argues that neocapitalism summons and supports singular modes of subjectivation, but only to reproduce them detached from their connection with life and turn them into products.² Creation, she writes, has become one of the most important raw materials of the current mode of production. Even the artists' subjectivity could be emptied of its changing singularity and turned into an identity, preferably a glamourised one. The value of the artists' subjectivity is then determined by their power of seduction.

But the question remains nevertheless – can “revolutionary” ideas be freed from their social/political forms of representation? More importantly, can these ideas be freed from the limitations of the communicative medium?

One alternative way to oppose the dominant system could be to withdraw from all forms of political representation, to renounce social and political responsibility, resist the compulsion to act and instead do nothing.³ Perhaps only in this utopian manner new foundations for a radical change can be made.

The other, more poetical way is an attempt to prolong the act of creation, which happens while crossing the border between consciousness and the social, communicating system. It is actually the very act of translating – “art in becoming” – these unmediated experiences of subjectivity that is revolutionary in nature. The principle that “leads the destiny of creation” then becomes a major claim to resistance. Analogous to this notion is a proposition by Deleuze and Guattari concerning reorganising thought that highlights some inter-

activity between the concept, object and subject and leads to a process of inventive connection. It is crossing that allows freedom of movement, a rupture in time that is not yet taken over by the (art) system. Therefore we are no longer limited by certain ways of thinking, discourses, contexts, methodologies and the like. In this new situation we are always a step ahead of the established order using the various tactics of appropriation, disappearing and appearing again by means of various unpredictable methods, forms, alliances, dislocations, interruptions, and disturbances of the dominant map.

The artists have been concerned with these issues/disturbances for a long time. In this context I would like to point out the great essay “The Praise of Laziness” by Mladen Stilinović, an artist from Zagreb, in which he claims there is no art without laziness. Laziness is the absence of movement and thought, dumb time – total amnesia. It is also indifference, staring at nothing, no activity, impotence. It is sheer stupidity, a time of pain, futile concentration.

A maxim at this point could be: “To divert the act of translation is to prolong the act of creation”. I believe this notion is important because it turns away from the revolutionary potential of secondary, mediated experiences – i.e. representations/forms of art – and turns attention instead to the subjectivity.

Some Diversions Are:

Metaphysical silence; “absolute distance” is a conscious removal of all outside stimuli, liberation from the obligations of the world, including the ones of the art system. Some Czechs artists in the 1970s in their works reduced the grand narrative to one moment, thus disconnecting the automatic circuits between regularised stimuli and habitual responses.⁴

Luhman⁵ attributed special communication in art that uses perception instead of language. Perception readily scans a familiar world for information without requiring a special decision on our parts to do so. When perception is liberated of mental images it does not only oppose object relations but radically cancels them.

In the same way Jan Mlčoch, as part of *Suspension - Great sleep 1974*, had himself suspended by hands and feet by means of nylon rope. His eyes were covered, his ears plugged in an attempt to be separated from space, to be in the air, not to have any reference points, to have no relation to any singular thing until the weight of his body made him experience pain.

“Perceptive processes”; these works are “non-mediated sensations”, with no results and no product. Artur Barrio, in his work *4 dias 4 noites* from 1970 wandered through Rio as part of a long process. During 4 days he wore himself physically out and began having perceptions. He wanted to achieve something absolute but in the end this was a work with no result as nothing remained except the artist’s experience that he could not translate to others.

Flávio de Carvalho, in one of his so-called experiments, was on a bus, saw a demonstration, got off the bus, put a green hat on and joined the demonstration. His most famous *experiencia* (experiment) was to walk the streets of São Paulo in 1956 in an eccentric outfit that consisted of a yellow-and-green striped blouse and a green short skirt worn over ballerina stockings and displaying a kind of ventilation tube under the blouse. He was just reacting to what was happening in that particular space and time. He provoked and received immediate reactions.

For the Situationists to construct situations meant to create real time and space, which was also the context in

which they could begin, experimentally, to create their own immediate experiences. These environments could in return transform individual and group experiences and would be transformed themselves as a result. With their concept of “drifting”, playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects, they aimed to release play and create a new cultural “theatre of operations”.

“Sensuousness”; in comparison to the reflective function of reason and understanding, these “works” enter the realm of sense perception beyond any predefined dictates of meaning. For Helio Oiticica and many other Brazilian artists, art was a supra-sensorial work, and he spoke of the necessity to have a supra-sensorial meaning of life, of transforming art processes into life feelings. The participator is shifted from his/her habitual field to a new one that awakens internal feelings rather than tries to apprehend external sensations. Body then becomes a site of resistance and is put through the ongoing process of restoration of the “sensory sensual”. He also wrote about the need for a new community that would not make works of art, but something similar to the experience in real life – *vivencias* –, somehow constructing an environment for life itself based on the premise that creative energy is inherent in everyone. This principle was best described by a neologism *crelazer*, which refers to the faith in leisure that is a condition to experience creativity and pure sensations.

“Moments”⁶; eruptions of spontaneous creativity, flashes of liberation, utopian consciousness that escape the daily programming and calculation. They leave traces since they break with habits and repetitions, instances that intensify the vital productivity of everydayness (while the situation is a created and organised moment). Moments are being described as transitory, critical, creative, unpredict-

able ... and they produce fractures in our subjectivity, introduce a sense of freedom from categorical thought, discipline, common structures, restraints, and the like since they have not yet become alienated time. Moments are sensations of powerful emotions such as delight, disgust, surprise, horror, outrage, and intense euphoria and as such have a revolutionary potential⁷ in the sense of Laclau's concept of a *moment of reactivation* that is a process of *defixation of meaning*. It can be argued though that it is only in a specific "space-time sensorium" or a "configuration of a space as political" or "partition of the sensible" that debates about the foundations of society really take place. It is beyond the scope of this short text to go into detail about the particular space-time relationship. Perhaps a way to conclude this paragraph would be to paraphrase David Howarth's saying that the character of temporality is a condition for politics, not politics itself. In the same manner "moments" could be seen as a condition for an event of politics, which must also always have a spatial dimension.

I will end or better open up this short meditation with the suggestion that what is revolutionary in art is its very opacity, its condition of being not-yet art and subsequently a tension that this border state produces, and its reluctance of getting consumed, as such disrupting the processes of various economic, political and cultural operations intrinsic to the institutional logic. Therefore even "autonomous" art can have a political function and can function as a point of resistance. These "small revolutions" that happen on a personal and bodily awareness level are not productive in the sense that they remain only as factual and temporal distinctions and as such cannot be appropriated and used by the power systems. Of course, the important questions remain. How to prolong what psychologist Csikszentmihalyi calls

"flow experiences", which are the states of condensed exceptional moments, the most intense moments in people's lives, and how then realise these possibilities in a new actuality? How "to invent a mode of cultural production that radically breaks up the current schemes of power in this area"⁸ and how to reshape through art the spaces left by the wakening of political conflict, as Rancière reminds us?

1. Some of these ideas came through conversations with my late colleague Igor Zabel. See for example his book *Eseji I : o moderni in sodobni umetnosti Založba /*cf.*, 2006

2. Suely Rolnik, *Despachos at the museum: Who knows what may happen...* at http://stretcher.org/essays/images/despachos/despachos_sr.php, accessed on 5 May 2008.

3. See Slavoj Žižek, “The Ongoing ‘Soft Revolution’”, *Critical Inquiry*, 30, Winter 2004, University of Chicago, p. 316. Of course it is necessary to rethink the consequences of such withdrawal for any long-term political action.

4. Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch, Karel Miler, Jiří Kovanda, Miloš Šejn and others.

5. Cf. Niklas Luhman, *Art as a social system*, Stanford University Press, 2000.

6. Cf. Henri Lefebvre in his writings on moments and situations.

7. I am thankful to Gal Kirn for pointing out in this context Rancière’s distinction between “aesthetics of politics” and “politics of aesthetics” which can be useful in this particular debate.

8. Felix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, “Molecular revolution in Brazil”, *Semiotext(e)*, English edition, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 2008, p. 33.