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**Unpredictable Becomings of Public Life**

The poetic force is one of the voices in the paradoxical polyphony through which are delineated the heterogeneous and unpredictable becomings of public life. These becomings continually reinvent themselves in order to liberate the life from the deadlocks that build up in the infectious zones where the present becomes unbearable. Artists have a fine ear for the inarticulate sounds that reach us from the unutterable, at the points where the dominant cartography frays apart. Their poetry is the incarnation of such sounds, which then can be heard among us.

Suely Rolnik

I would like to propose a model of the exhibition as a medium for an articulation of a politics of art, in which ideas would be translated or engaged in specific, sensual modes of expression rather than effectively communicated; where traces and memories of the past would be translated into artworks and activated anew in connection to contemporary and anticipated experiences. Rendered into art, different local traditions, historical contingencies, ephemeralities, alterities, and the ambiguity of singular experiences would be voiced separately and, at the same time, engaged in multiple relations with each other. These sorts of relations would enable singularities to meet and resonate without the necessity of standardizing them or depriving them of their idiosyncrasies. The exhibition could thus become a model for an aesthetic experience, what Édouard Glissant called the “poetics of relation.” I am introducing these issues in connection with my curatorial practice and the curatorial collaborations I have undertaken, mostly at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź.

It seems to me that an affinity between the notion of the archival and the artistic, along with the curatorial work in which I am interested, could be established along the lines of Suely Rolnik’s theoretical and critical thinking. The model of archival and historical engagement she proposes is a life-affirming force, enabling one to
sense the living otherness of the world. It fuses political and poetic forces in relation to present and emergent phenomena in order to mobilize affects to reinvent existing territories. Work with history, including art history, should “activate sensible practices experienced in the present, necessarily different from those that were originally lived but with an equivalent critical-poetic density.” The aesthetic experience can, as she claims, stimulate “resonating capacities of our bodies” not only to challenge the hibernation of the senses stuck in past narratives and territories, but also to undo the sensuous anaesthesia of a hyperactive, flexible, market-driven mode of subjectivity, as well as the commodification of difference produced by late capitalism.

In light of the above, I would like to point to and discuss a couple of case studies that have allowed me to work out a certain (curatorial) practice-based theory: Another City Another Life, which was exhibited at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art and other locations in Warsaw, as well as Workers Leaving the Workplace, Eyes Looking for a Head to Inhabit, and Untimely Stories, all exhibited at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. Aware of the failures, limitations, and unresolved problems that occurred while working on these exhibitions, as well as the publications that accompanied them, I tend to consider these exhibitions, not as the embodiments of the proposed models, but rather, as the potentialities – incomplete piece in the errant process of learning.

The starting points for our work were complex historical, political, and social issues addressed by contemporary artists. Another City, Another Life (curated by Benjamin Cope and myself) was an attempt to reflect on the post-Communist transformation of the city of Warsaw, while Workers Leaving the Workplace dealt with the post-industrial change of (the meaning of) labor. Eyes Looking for a Head to Inhabit (curated by Aleksandra Jach, Katarzyna Sloboda, Magdalena Ziolkowska, and myself) revolved around the futurist imagination, utopian thinking, and biopolitical concerns in modern and contemporary art. And, finally, in Untimely Stories, together with Jarosław Lubiąk, we tried to work with the untimely politics of art in order to imagine the upcoming social, political and historical conditions of Europe. Still, none of these exhibitions offered any efficient solutions that could be directly implemented in order to introduce tangible social or political changes.
Learning from and thinking with the artists involved in these collaborations and respecting the resistance of artworks (encountered while imposing on them the notions derived predominantly from social theories or current political struggles), we tried to elaborate on the idea of the politics of art. In this framework, art would not operate as a mimicry or reproduction of political action, rhetoric or didactics, but rather, it would be engaged in the world – also outside of the artistic field – in its own specific manner. The procedures of the politics of art – as we have tried to pursue them through practice and theory – are articulated by formal solutions and entail working with fiction as a function of truth, as well as with translation and a conception of untimeliness that views it as a mode of engagement with art in its times and contexts.

This notion of untimeliness is derived from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*. According to the author, to act untimely is to act counter to our time and thereby to act on our time, and thus “for the benefit of a time to come.” For Nietzsche, untimeliness necessitates a reversal from the present moment in order to transform it into a different one. Untimeliness is not an escapist or nostalgic position. On the contrary, it is an engagement in the present time. This concept of untimeliness has been taken up by Giorgio Agamben in order to define the contemporary. He claims that those who are contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it, nor adjust themselves to its demands. Precisely because of this condition, they have specific capacities of perceiving and grasping their own time along with its blind spots, missed opportunities, and solutions. In the exhibition *Untimely Stories*, we tried to test the concept of the contemporary in the face of contemporary art. For, as we have assumed, contemporary art is capable of going beyond the current moment to discern its obscurity, that which is yet unrecognised or other, and is thus irrelevant, unknown, blanked out, and emergent. This kind of vision requires the capability of transforming time, connecting different times, working with the spectres and traumas from and of the past, anticipating the future, and acting according to the exigency of the recognitions. The artistic insights are often constructed through the process of translation, which involves work on form and with fiction. Fiction does not provide an easy way out, nor an escape from present conditions; rather, it is a way
to recognize symptoms of crisis and to apprehend latent repressive forces blocking transformation of current orders. However, fiction is not just a sensitive analytical tool; it can also open up new or different possibilities by activating an “as if” mode of thinking, experiencing, and sensing in order to overcome stagnation.

Therefore, in the exhibition “Untimely Stories,” many artworks were conceived through performing, staging, and materializing fictional encounters and narratives, exploring the least possible tracks of events. For instance, the work of Tamás Kaszás and Anikó Lorant (“Famine Food,” part of Untimely Stories) is grounded in their expectation of the coming ecological collapse, which, in their view, will disrupt current social contracts, modes of mass production, consumption, and conditions of living in areas influenced by Western civilization. Their installations, based on the research of autonomous practices and the poetics of survival, tend to materialize something that has not (yet?) happened, urging us to experience it through the senses as if it did happen – to imagine what it means (and feels like) for fiction to come true. In her work Supposing I love you. And you also love me, Wendelien Van Oldenborgh created a model for a democratic public sphere, something that, according to her, does not exist (any more? Not yet?) in one particular European country, but only in a spectral form. Staging a conversation between people who have never met before – the Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan and young migrants living in the Netherlands – and who share their difficulties in socializing there, Van Oldenborgh’s piece points to the symptoms of a crisis of democracy in this society. In particular, she illuminates the mechanisms of producing and silencing uncomfortable otherness. In her work, different positions and forms of utterance that are unalike and incompatible can be articulated and heard, and can resonate together. It is, in fact, a fictional intimate and sensual public sphere, where all kinds of voices enter into multilayered and multidirectional relationships with each other, just as it happens in love, when the friction of differences proves creative, and opens up to the other. This staging sets the very conditions for this experience – which reaches far beyond rhetoric – materializing through a meticulous montage of sound, images, texts and in the exhibition space.

Dealing with what is deemed to have disappeared; with is emergent, unpredictable or presently impossible, the fictional narratives featured within Untimely Stories.
offered some insights into and anticipation of the forthcoming situation of Europe (as a symbolic and real community). For instance, they reversed colonial relations between current and already outmoded notions of centers and peripheries, focusing on knowledge and skills reaching beyond Euro- and Western-centric cultural paradigms and notions of modernity that still seem to have claims to supremacy, even as they are losing their economic and ideological foundations. However, it should be clear that this very vision of the de-modernization of Europe that appeared in the exhibition is not anything new, and had already been discussed in other fields.

We attempted to deal with this vision in a manner that would not simply illustrate current geopolitical debates. Rather, we tried to work with those aspects that are often either omitted in such debates, or are cynically exploited for the management of fear, particularly where unpredictable, disturbing or obscured aspects related to social and political upheavals are concerned. And we did not offer any set of ready-to-use solutions. Consequently, as was manifested on the occasion of this show and others, the untimely politics of art has not proved influential on current political conditions. This, however, does not deprive it of its impact. Art is considered here a field of engagement in that which is not yet known, in what is unlikely, ambivalent, other or singular (not yet fully belonging), and without any security that this engagement will prove to be productive. Such a position can surely be perceived as irrelevant and powerless. On the other hand, provided it goes beyond the current hierarchies, the politics of art compels us to revise what is powerful and relevant, for its agency works not only with a different (untimely) temporal plane, but also with different means than the operative speech of political action or capitalist marketing. The procedure of translation activated in aesthetic processes refuses simply to convey, communicate, or propagate any specific content. As Walter Benjamin taught us, translation is never an exact and faithful transfer from one language into another, but a complex and passionate mode of reading, interpretation, and engagement in which the original is transformed or even, at times, lost. Similarly, the work on artwork could be perceived as an engagement and process through which ideas, texts, views, and histories become translated and transformed into an artistic language.

Another take on the resistance of art against the demands of communication, and
against becoming a predetermined social and political utility, can be found in the essay “What is the Creative Act?” by Gilles Deleuze. For Deleuze, ideas in art are inseparably engaged in specific modes of expression (involving sensations, affects and perceptions). It is a different order than that of the logics of communication. According to him, communication and information have become tools for exchanging and transmitting orders and regimes, and, most importantly, instruments of control applied in new modes of governance and production covering and modulating the ever-increasing areas of life that we would now call biopolitical production. Effective communication is thus a means of production in late capitalist societies, which Deleuze defines as “societies of control.” It is in art that Deleuze recognizes a potential to instigate counter-information as a means of resistance. He hopes that this mode of engaged art will “call on a people who do not yet exist.” The proven political influence of art in forming this coming community can not be predetermined. Following his arguments, the process of “engaging ideas” in the form of a work of art is not about programming a clear message for particular ideological ends and tangible effects. If art can evoke any dissonances in our perception of the world (“call on a people who do not yet exist”), it will probably fail to do so by multiplying the operative and commodified mode of communication characteristic of the control mechanisms of capitalism, even if used for different purposes. However, the very act of evoking something that does not yet or should not exist, but perhaps is already embedded in the world, has a performative agency. It changes reality, even if it operates on a symbolic level.

Ali Kazma’s films from the series Obstructions (included in the exhibition Workers Leaving the Workplace) bring to light some aspects of reality that usually go beyond our well organized and ordered perception – that is, the material and corporeal aspect of every kind of labor, regardless of and against its hierarchical classifications of immaterial, cognitive, and manual, creative and mechanical, or underdeveloped and ultramodern. Painstakingly recording and editing footage that features the movements of machines and bodies, tracking gazes, expressions, and gestures at work, Kazma’s
ambivalent films capture, in a condensed way, both an immense exploitation of whole organisms in production, as well as the potential for a different community between people (workers) and their environment – a community based on integrity of and exchange between material, corporeal, affective and mental energy flows. It is left open to the viewers how to deal with this ambivalence and complexity.

Thinking with artists working this way alongside the texts in question, together with my colleagues (oftentimes co-readers), we have tried to elaborate a model of the exhibition that would not inform or persuade audiences in a didactic manner, but instead would be an exercise in (collective) thinking and imagining. Its form can be associated with a visual essay, one that works with a specific agenda, yet, at the same time, has a subjective perspective and a fragmented, dispersed structure. We have attempted to establish links between and constellations of the artworks in a manner that could echo Édouard Glissant’s “poetics of relation.” This kind of complex connectedness implies that identities, despite bearing singularities, are not closed entities, but are subject to processes of extension and alteration by relations taking place in a chaotic, rhizomatic network. The medium of the exhibition allows one to stimulate motion of an “errant thought” between various traditions, perspectives, and identities, as well as parallel, corresponding – but also conflicted – stories and unlikely encounters. Mapping relations between singular voices is not meant to subsume them into one general and generalizing narrative. Rather, it is a task designed to foster the attentive search for multiple kinships, exchanges, flows, and resonances among differences. One could argue that practicing the poetics of relation could be an exercise in going beyond one’s own position, to sense the otherness within and without oneself.

Specific poetics of relation have been made possible through collaboration with the architect Krzysztof Skoczylas, who has created an exhibition display that works as a setting in which connected artworks interact in unexpected associations. No illusion of neutrality has been produced. Rather, this exhibition display functions as a visible environment for perceiving both various links and dissimilarities between different artworks. A semitransparent architecture of “Untimely Stories” enabled the viewers to develop relations between different positions from decentered, unexpected, dispersed, and shifting standpoints. It was meant to trigger diverse
trajectories and flows for thoughts and senses, while imposing neither a dominant track, nor an overarching conclusion.

Running the risk of dehistoricization, we have dared to follow that logic while working explicitly with historical events and the processes of history making. For Glissant, producing and sharing knowledge of the past, even if it emerges from a concrete locality, always transgresses confined territories and temporal boundaries: “thought draws the imaginary of the past: a knowledge becoming. One can never stop it to assess it nor to isolate it.”

In the case of Eyes Looking for a Head to Inhabit, the point of departure was a singular historical event – the inauguration of the International Collection of Modern Art of the “a.r.” group at the Municipal Museum of History and Art in Łódź in 1931. We decided to work with and on the collection, as well as the theory and practice of the artists who initiated it (Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński), not as a familial root of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (whose identity is based on this collection), but as a contingent case, in relation to which we attempted to enter into a dialogue with selected avant-garde traditions by means of contemporary art practices. Our project revolved, in particular, around the avant-garde topos of art as a laboratory, where artists construct prototypes of new devices, solutions to build a better functioning and progressive world. Focusing on selected moments of “intensity,” the exhibition presented ways in which the avant-garde ideas were transformed, transgressed, abandoned, or radically questioned. For instance, we juxtaposed the motif of the organization of rational, harmonious, universal, and uniform spaces in the work of Katarzyna Kobro with that contemporary art (including works by Anetta Mona Chișa & Lucia Tkáčová, Barbara Hammer, Gustav Metzger, Monika Zawadzki, Leszek Golec & Tatiana Czekalska, and Jadwiga Sawicka) which is concerned with inhabiting a complex environment marked both by embodied experiences of gender or racial difference, and by diverse, concrete, historical, socio-political, personal, or ecological conditions.

The task of releasing ideas from the past in relation to the present requires searching for something that could be common, but not general. The commissioned contributions of Jadwiga Sawicka and Agnieszka Piksa suggested that it could be a friction between complexity, contingency, and the alterity of particular experiences,
and the collective, universalistic narratives by which the former were identified. Both artists had engaged in some aspects of theory, practice, and the biographies of Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński respectively. Their works highlighted conflicts and problems such as the uneasy feelings of isolation and uprootedness in other fields of life, outside the universal rules of art, that could have been felt by avant-garde artists who were trying to inhabit a universal, transnational artistic discourse, particularly those artists established in local environments that were, at times, indifferent or resistant. Theirs is not the history of the glory of the avant-garde, but a narrative of the anxiety and ambivalence that Piksa and Sawicka envisioned while working with the archival materials. But these complex feelings are not suitable as weapons in a battlefield of different struggles. They are, in fact, something disturbing, and thus constantly silenced or managed. As Susan Buck-Morss wrote with regard to collective memory: “The remembered past is preserved in stories. As part of the collective imaginations, it becomes a legend…In legend, individually lived experience is whitewashed in the process of collectivizing it, cleansing it of what is truly terrifying: ambiguity.”

I would like to suggest that contemporary art can recall a sense of non-totalitarian and “inoperative community” based on sharing singular, though often scattered and fragmented, experiences of ambiguity, uncertainty, and alterity. Following artists, one finds a community in unexpected, hardly visible locations and forms. For example, the practice of Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor consists of attentive observation, recording or recreating, as well as exposing and recontextualizing material pieces of reality. They often focus on that which is marginal, transitory, ephemeral; things as minor as dust, rust, fluff, and soil. For the project Another City, Another Life, they prepared a modest intervention that consisted of digging a small pit in the ground which they then filled with concrete dust (Dust, Grzybowska 51). They left the dust pit open to weather conditions and recorded the action. Their work appeared in a hardly visible wasteland in the Wola district of Warsaw, which thereby became a place to view
different temporal layers of the city. The dynamic construction of new, exclusive residences and bank facilities that took place all around the site contrasted with the different presence of communist housing estates, rundown car-repair workshops, and a few abandoned and forgotten houses that had witnessed the times of the Jewish ghetto in this area. The act of digging in the earth and then covering the pit with concrete dust was reminiscent of a burial, and the concrete square – of a tombstone. Standing in contrast with public rituals and official monuments meant to serve collective memory, the intervention recalled the city’s omitted, heterogeneous spatial and temporal layers – distinct fragments and tiny bits of the city that were either eradicated or compressed and homogenised under different kinds of construction.

According to Susan Buck-Morss, it is precisely the work with fragments of historical narratives from a contemporary perspective that enables the reclamation of the past’s lived, transitory experience from the exclusive and generalizing territories charted by official memory. Furthermore, it allows for the creation of a common, but not collective, perception of history, an archive of one’s own: “[b]lazed free of official memory, the fragments of history are preserved in images. They retain nearness of original experience, and with it, ambiguity. Their meaning is only in a constellation with the present.” Buck-Morss adds: “History is layered. But the layers are not stacked neatly. The disruptive force of the present puts pressure on the past, scattering pieces of it forward into unanticipated locations. No one owns these pieces. To think so is to allow categories of private property to intrude into a commonly shared terrain wherein the laws of exclusionary inheritance do not apply. The history of humanity demands a communist mode of perception.”

Perhaps the exhibition, as a poetic archive, can become a space to sense this vulnerable community, one in which meaningless or ambiguous pieces become public.

Footnotes

1 Suely Rolnik, The Body’s Contagious Memory. Lygia Clark’s Return to the


4 Suely Rolnik, “Archive Mania,” 176.


10 Ibid, 324.

11 Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 1.


13 See Benjamin Cape, Mona Vătămanu and Florin Tudor, “Dust, 51 Grzybowska
Street,” in Another City, Another Life, ed. Benjamin Cope and Joanna Sokołowska (Warszawa: Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2009), 113.

14 Ibid., 89.

15 Ibid., 83.