

Interview with artists Stephan Dillemoth, Maximiliane Baumgartner, Mirja Reuter, and Florian Gass
– PR group

This interview will also be published on tranzitblog in Hungarian.

This year the Catalyst Award examined how art is able to shape social processes. It also encompassed a more open process than in the previous years, as the audience played a crucial role as well. Within an open forum, everyone was invited to debate and delineate a set of criteria, with which the awardees were selected.

This year Munich-based artists Stephan Dillemoth, Maximiliane Baumgartner, Mirja Reuter, and Florian Gass were invited to design the prize for the winners. The artists also held a two-week long workshop in Budapest within the framework of the tranzit.hu Free School for Art Theory and Practice, where they worked together with the participants on a performance to be presented at the award ceremony which took place in February, 2014 at the Trafó House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest. The group presented a series of intervening mini performances, and set up a “money-giving” machine, consisting of human bodies, thorough which they handed the winners the amount of 500.000 HUF that goes along with the award.

This interview was conducted by Csilla Hódi and Virág Bogyó, members of the Hungarian artist group PR group, who asked the artists about their experiences of being involved with the Catalyst Award project, as well as their bohemian working methodology.

PR: SHORT TERM/LONG TERM? INSIDE/OUTSIDE? ALONE/TOGETHER?

x1: I prefer long term, but you always have different conditions or topics, which are setting your borders, like this workshop which was scheduled for two weeks long...

x2: I vote for the translation between the opposites, they are often the hard and important ways of concern. You might have short-term engagements, but long-term impact.

PR: HOW DID YOUR COLLABORATION START? WHAT DYNAMICS BELONG TO IT?

x3: We started to work together at the academy, about 6 years ago, with a group, called K2ao (Klasse 2 Aufbau Organisation)¹. After that context dissolved, we were involved in several collaborative projects, like we are now, here. Lose and small collaborations, like that of x1 and me emerged out of K2ao.

x4: Everyone likes to perform, aside of his or her own work. We are working on different levels: collaborations, education, performances, workshops, and installations.

x1: We all have a common interest, a common field of research material. We started researching the golden bohemian period in Munich, after the turn of the century. Most importantly, the time around 1918, when a group of artists, writers, and politicians tried to set up a “soviet republic”, a republic of councils in Munich.

x2: Munich has been an interesting place back then. And it helped to critically frame our role as artists and students in a city with such a historical background.

PR: ARE THESE BOHEMIAN APPROACHES TO CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS AROUND ARTISTIC PRACTISE STILL PRESENT IN THE DILLEMUTH CLASS?

¹ After the butcher: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBViVIJ9cUU>, Amsterdam W139:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaWW8LseGDg>, True Lives:
<http://deborahschamoni.com/exhibitions/performances/>

x3: The topics have changed over the past years, but there are some questions that holds them together: A general topic is the relationship between the academy (as a discursive field in the fine arts) and the public sphere in the midst of a seismic shift induced by the corporate world economy. We believe that this shift goes hand-in-hand with a different function of the arts, a different conception of the role of the artist in society, and a different quality of education and research. What part do institutional research, self-organization, and bohemia play in these developments?

x4: Together with a group of students from Hamburg we also investigated “Lebensreform”, i.e. the life-reform movements between 1890 and 1933, and to what extent they can be seen as predecessors of the 1960's alternative, revolutionary lifestyle experiments, which have had a huge impact on the way Western societies have changed since then.

x1: When we started to work in Munich together, we looked into the history of bohemia, its fuzzy relationship between politics and art, its side effects on society, politics, and the economy.

x2: For about four years, we were examining the history of artists and reformers who worked in marginal situations, so that they could look at the whole of society, in order to analyze it and to change it.

x3: But it was a more deliberate decision of those life-reformers and bohemians, whereas now, in a new set of inquiries that we call “Under the Wheel” and “On the Leash,” we try to examine situations where people are pushed to the margin, where they are being excluded, oppressed, and controlled. To be one of them is not a deliberate decision any more.

PR: WHY AND HOW HAS THE TERM, THEORY, AND PRACTICE OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH BECOME LATELY A PARADIGM OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE, WHY IS IT FASHIONABLE?

x4: The educational field is in a process of fundamental changes. Art criticism, theory, and education are working on a critical self-identification. Artists and theorists are questioning the basic structures of research, culture, and knowledge production. But it is still a question if activities or artists might be able to intervene and foster changes in the broader academic sphere. It also depends on your own desires and goals of your work.

x1: Calling yourself a researcher might give you a certain independence of the market, unlike in the eighties when most of the artists were quite dependent on it. However, today you constantly have to prove the use-value of your research. Without promising use-value or profits, you probably will not get any funding. But still, I think a research-structure offers more space for critical thinking.

x2: Since the term “research” came up as a keyword for art projects, you have to deal with this projection and ask yourself what “artistic research” could really be?

x3: In the beginning of the 1990s, artistic research became an interesting device to hoof out the post-modern macho art production of the ‘80s...

x4: Yes, the more arbitrary art-production becomes, the more helpful the term “research” gets, because research introduces a way of understanding art as a set of problems and parameters, and it comes with the idea that art offers enough interesting methodologies and experiments in order to get engaged in a process of finding something new.

x4: But in the mid-‘90s, with the strong neoliberal thrust, “research” became just another tool for control.

x1: You can see it with the Bologna process as well: all institutions of reproduction, from kindergarten to schools to university, have been occupied and “reformed” by neoliberal thought. Now these institutions are used to reproduce the new ideology.

PR: COULD THE TERM AND THE CREATION OF THE TERM, LIKE BOHEMIAN RESEARCH, BE UNDERSTOOD AS A STRATEGY TO GAIN MORE AUTONOMY IN ARTISTIC PRACTICE?

x2: We have not invented the term “bohemian research,” but I find it useful. I have heard it for the first time in an interview with Schüttpelz/Fohrmann², when we were discussing the conditions and the impact of group formations as “condensation points for critical thought.”

² http://www.societyofcontrol.com/research/e_fohr_a.htm

x3: For example, the Surrealists, the Situationists, or political groups like the Kommune 1³, practiced this collective method. "Bohemian research" means that they were investigating the problems at hand, arising from the daily practice of life.

x4: It is researching life by living it.

x1: That means, you do not have to conceptualize your research, as you might have to do so within an institutional context.

x2: Trying to find new ways to live your life against the established order, finding others who have similar problems, but different knowledge, can lead to a research-like process and hopefully to new findings, that can change the surrounding order, or drill some holes in them.

x3: Hopefully!

x4: One can have very different motivations: theoretical, political, or just naive visions, hanging around together and trying out things, like spitting on peoples jacket, and so on.

x1: Like the early punks in Düsseldorf?

PR: WHAT DIFFICULTIES DO YOU EXPERIENCE IN YOUR DAILY WORK, WORKING IN GROUPS?

x1: I find that the decision-making processes within groups are always the hardest...

x2: That is why decision-making has to be thematized by the group. However, it can be a trap if the discussion of decision-making is the group's main focus. I think groups can "age".

x3: Yes, a group is young, when people find each other through elective affinities, through mutual attraction, the group lives of the differences that each participant brings into the group. To exchange, to discover each other, to be able to contribute one's very own differences to a common body of knowledge and experience can be a very joyful and satisfying process.

x4: This can lead to a process of an increasingly differentiated communication that allows the group to dig deep into shared problems and concerns. That could be called research.

x1: But through its fine understanding and differentiation, the group can cut itself away, into an eventually exclusive, esoteric knowledge—or, if these findings are popularized, opens itself for success.

x2: But, anyway, the group undergoes an aging process. Hierarchies and problems in communication arise, they can be discussed and solved, there might be the need to define each other's roles inside the group.

x3: When groups fall apart, the members can reassemble or exchange into/with other groups. This regrouping happens quite often in the music scene. Networks of groups are therefore good things, because they can help the groups "aging" and "falling apart" to have a positive result.

PR: COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR CURRENT WORKSHOP EXPERIENCES?

x4: I experienced it as a very positive workshop with great participants, but it is a pity that we did not have more time to get to know each other and each other's work better.

x1: It is a bit strange, or unusual to make a workshop and have the subject of "making/ framing the show for the Catalyst Award ceremony." But when we came to Budapest, it was a good occasion to get to know each other and to talk about this award, about its whole process, the criteria, and so on.

x2: Together with the workshop participants, we developed a point of view to react on the current situation.

x3: Faced with this award-ceremony, we had to deal with a lot of different things, not only with tranzit.hu, but with the whole network around tranzit.hu, with this interview here, with the participants, with Trafó and

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kommune_1

its stage, with the making of the performance and with the expectations around it. So, this is an interesting mixture...

x4: Yes, the invitation of tranzit.hu was full of uncertainties. We did not know much about tranzit.hu, its role in the art scene, we did not know much of the Catalyst Award either—except that we should do a workshop that could lead into the award ceremony. By doing so, we learned that there is a bag of problems connected to it—to award ceremonies in general.

x1: I just experienced a similar story, when I was awarded a prize in y1. I realized that more money was spent on the ceremony than the amount of the prize itself was.

x2: Since art is seen as an idealistic good thing, it needs to be honored and encouraged with yet another idealistic value. And that has to be created! That is why the image-making of the award seems to be of great concern. That is the image value you get.

x3: Yeah! Now you can say you got the so-and-so award and everyone knows that this is a great honor, no matter what amount of money comes along with it. On the contrary, money in this context seems to contaminate the idealistic value; that is why it is basically kept under the table.

x4: So in the case of the Catalyst Award, we were invited as artists, to produce a prize object or a performance, as an idealistic thing, in order to honor another idealistic social art project.

x1: We tried to work with the conditions and the situation of the prize itself in this performative way, showing the money as a fact that you cannot ignore in a capitalistic system, and create some kind of transparency about it.

x2: And what is this ceremony about? The program of the event is really strict with all the presentations and time frame, but I think getting an award should be a celebration.

x3: Yes, not only celebrating the winner, but all the people who came together, who are basically working on the same field.

x4: And then it should be glamorous, a kind of extravaganza with glitters, fireworks, and all that stuff!

x1: I think for some of the participants, who are not performers in their daily life, it is also an experiment to be on the stage and to develop a contribution within a group...

x2: It is a part of our artistic practice, we are not professional dancers or actors, but it is important that WE are doing it, ourselves, that we are using our own bodies, our physical presence in this context.

PR: WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE WHOLE PROCESS OF THE CATALYST AWARD? DO YOU THINK THAT THESE CRITERIAS CAN RULE OUT SOME GOOD PROJECTS?

x3: Actually, we do not know how this process developed, we just worked with the end result: the criteria.

x4: I was missing some playful terms...

x1: Yes, playfulness is something which should always be a part of an artistic process.

x2: I think when one works with communities and social groups that particular social qualities should not be left out. And these qualities include the enjoyment of togetherness, especially in a common political fight, here we want playfulness, experimentation, use of artistic means, and the celebration of (small) success. Working together should be enriching and should be fun.

x3: On the other hand, I really appreciate this democratic way of discussing. We were not part of this process but when I first read the criteria, it felt more like reading an application form that often includes these terms.

x4: Wait! We have to be so frank to say that it is the official politics that generates homelessness, that is also responsible for the exclusion of ethnic minorities, that is responsible for bad and expensive housing etc.

x1: Any political analysis and critique and action has to start here.

x3: To ease the impact of such politics is important. But “self-help” can also be criticized for eventually stabilizing bad politics. Ok, and here we have this award and people who work hard in an idealistic and self-exploitative manner to relieve the distress caused by state politics. I certainly respect and admire this work. Also I think this award is basically a good thing.

x2: But once the award takes itself too seriously, if you just want things to be supa dup a democratic and the criteria to be super solid, then I miss a bit of reflexivity about the award’s own agenda and its limits.

x3: Also in the idealistic social work of artists and activists, I sometimes see an all too serious and moralistic approach.

X4: For example, we thought it would be a good idea not to hide the money that comes with the award, to show it and merge it with the idealistic prize, i.e., to use the cash as decoration on our costumes, and give it to the winner. But activists then told us that the homeless people they work with would probably not like or misunderstand this gesture. Ok, we left that out, not to hurt anyone’s feelings, no need to talk about this anymore!

x1: We were also thinking of the competitive nature of the award during the workshop process, and how to confront this with our performance. There is always the aspect of competition with any award, and with this particular Catalyst Award. It brings forth the issue of unpaid labor because voluntary organizations are nominated. There are so many people involved in these social projects, yet only one gets the money.

x3: What we read about the cultural, political situation in Hungary makes this award (including its democratic process) really important.

x1: ...Yes, but in this situation, when the institutions are more and more taken over by the government, places like this become the last bastions for work.

x3: Before we came here, we had many questions, but now I will take more questions home with me. I do not really have answers to the problems we encountered here, I cannot solve them, and they are not mine. Neither artistically, nor practically. But I guess that is a good thing!

(After answering all questions – a discussion between all the present people occurred about possible considerable improvements, which we do not want to keep from the reader.)

Thinking about future ceremonies

x2+x3: rrrrrrrrh---uhhw--rrrrrrrrrh---uhhw--rrrrrrrrrh---uhhw--rrrrrrrrrh---uhhw--rrrrrrrrrh---uhhw--

x1: Well, I was just thinking what if we no longer draw a line between activists and artists. Because somehow I am fed up with this categorizations or processes of doing so.

x4+x1+x3: rrrrrrtsch- rrrrrrtschh - rrrrrrtsch----rrrrrrrtschhhhh

x2: Indeed on the contrary! Why are not there more awards for every category?

x1+x2+x3: äschhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh-äschhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh-
äschhh

x3: Yes, in order to undermine this process of competition, there should be one event where only the nominees are among themselves. They should have the possibility to exchange their experiences, to enrich themselves without any representational gesture. Discussions, presentations can be held in a concentrated atmosphere in order to set up synergies for future projects, maybe with a broader common ground.

x1+x2: huwschschschi-whi-whi-whi-huwschschschi-whi-whi-whi-huwschschschi-whi-whi-whi-huwschschschi-whi-whi-whi-huwschschschi-whi-whi-whi...

x4: Yeah, and of course this “nominee day” is also a celebration for each group/project together. Because every group can be seen as a winner! So every participant benefits from the award, but altogether, simultaneously.

z1: Okay, okay, I see you have a lot of proposals for the future Catalyst Award events. But psst! Keep these ideas to yourselves please. Well, thank you for this interview!

Video report of the workshop in Budapest: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGF7QZbu-0>