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ARTISTS WORKING REALITY. Connecting People

Dominique Lämmli

Studying and discussing art and social transformation projects like Chingchun Warehouse in Hong Kong or Jatiwangi art Factory in Indonesia shows that "participatory art," "community art," or "community activism" are linked to fuzzy concepts or ideas. To gain and be able to compare theoretical or practical knowledge about these projects, we need detailed descriptions. Therefore, the first part of this essay draws attention to some critical aspects in current discussions on art and change processes. The second part then provides a list of terms, project phases, and questions useful for in-depth descriptions of how artists connect people to co-create better life conditions step-by-step.

PART I

What can art do? Depending on our art notions, motivations, and aims, we will answer this question practically or/and theoretically. Looking at current art tendencies in global contexts, the practical answers seem evident when it comes to experimenting with and opening up future possibilities for what art can do, what its reach might be, and which effects are desired. These practices question and reposition both the role of art and the expectations about its

impact and quality. Whereas some academics believe that art needs to “hurt,” disturb, stir, provoke, and somehow (hopefully) revolutionise, we are witnessing an increasing tendency worldwide of artists “working reality” (Lämmli 2014) by fostering inclusion and a sense of community. This tendency might be seen as the accelerated and hybridised transmission of diverse cultural traditions.

Connecting People. Many of the projects potentially linked to “artists working reality” aim to connect people, to initiate and accompany social movements to create awareness of existing conditions, to activate citizens, and to enact possibilities for “better lives.” This shaping of reality takes place without following normative and preconceived concepts imposed top-down. Rather, better conditions are conceived bottom-up, through step-by-step suggestions and negotiations. Respect others, create trust, formulate and transform needs: these aspects are central to such transformation processes. Meandering is another. The future is understood as being worked upon, and not as a defined objective that can be targeted directly. As such, these projects value complex dynamics and provide platforms for multi-vocality and visions nurtured through multi-perspectivity. Interlinking with these processes, art, in its many facets, has been discussed worldwide relative to geographical regions and cultural dispositions (see, for example, Felshin 1995, Lacy 1995, Harding 2005, Kester 2011, Finkelppearl 2014, Huybrechts 2014, Lee 2014). Evident today nevertheless are accelerated and increased dissemination and exchange between various interest groups; locally anchored and globally related, these groups share their know-how, methods, and strategies.

Contemporary Art discourses have coined various headings for art activities interlinking with social transformation processes:

artist working reality, co-art, art and activism, socially engaged art, art in community, community art, community-based art, experimental communities, community cultural development, public art, critical art, dialogic art, conversational art, socially cooperative art, relational art/aesthetics, collaborative art, co-creational art, antispectatorial art, anticipatory art, interactive art, littoral art, process-oriented art, interventionist art, research-based art, participatory art, aesthetics of human interaction, contextual art, social practice, popular art, art activism, community activism. (Bourriaud 1998, Bishop 2012, Bucher 2014,

Finkelpearl 2014, Groys 2014, Lämmli 2014, etc.).

Which label to chose? Working as a practicing artist for nearly three decades, studying “Art in Action” for the last eight years, discussing its reach and effects with many colleagues in Switzerland and abroad (Germany, Hong Kong, Indonesia, India, Malawi etc.) has taught me that the most productive approach for artists, theorists, and community workers to engage in, and exchange ideas about art and social transformation processes, is to offer detailed accounts of actual events. I have rarely found two people who have the same understanding of any of the above concepts or labels. And yet, more often than not, these are used as if they transport common understandings and values. For philosophers, clarifying terms and concepts is routine. In practical settings, however, definitions play another role: they can be clear or fuzzy, conscious or unconscious, but still form a kind of background knowledge for action and production. If every morning we questioned our habit of drinking a cup of hot water, tea, or coffee, we would be caught up in endless philosophising, without ever drinking the beverage in question. Being practical, however, we—unreflectingly—pour our preferred liquid into a cup and enjoy the morning starter. That’s how practical work works: based on our knowledge—which we carry with us at all times—we use our tools and means as we act. And we re-enact, adapt, and change while acting. Of course, if problems arise, and practical solutions or (re)-actions are failing, we are best aided by problematising notions or actions from afar, to come up with ideas about how to approach matters. Yet in practical settings, clarification often arises from doing and making, just as plausibility and good practices make sense relative to the particular contexts and objectives. In short, whereas fuzzy concepts are used to categorise and describe projects, they frequently conceal (or even disguise) rather than elucidate a project’s knowledge potentials. On the other hand, fuzzy concepts have no hindering effect when employed in practical work. Another reason why the above terms and labels pertain to fuzzy concepts is their sweeping content. For instance, “participation” implies anything from regarding participants as active partners to seeing them as passive bystanders (Huybrechts et al., 2014:98).

“Art labeling.” Despite the previous remarks, let us not forget that “art labeling” is an important strategy to make one’s voice heard within the many art

discourses. Used by practitioners and academics alike, labeling is an effective way of revealing particular art practices seen and augmenting their cultural and symbolic capital. "Art labelling" is a signalling and legitimising process used to promote exhibitions, events, and artists—to distinguish them from others and to boost their value and topicality.

Nevertheless, many involved in inclusive art practices, fostering effective and sustainable art in the contexts of social transformation processes, do not seem to define either market- or any art discourse requirements as key value judgements for their actions. Moreover, in some art and social transformation contexts, the word "art" is deliberately not used, because it would immediately be understood as an elitist affair unrelated to the lifeworld, and hence useless. In other contexts, though, "art" is used deliberately, because it is immediately understood as pleasurable, culturally appreciated, positively infusing everyone's life.¹ Therefore, the ideologies and assumptions informing "art labels" are manifold and complex while at the same time they remain underdetermined. This deficiency can be counteracted by using in-depth descriptions of practical know-how, knowledge, experiences, production modes, motivations, intentions, and solutions. These explanations of actions should not be understood as "statements on distinct ontological spheres existing 'in the heads' of actors, but as informative redescriptions of practices [...] which are explained by formulating new hypotheses of expression about the relation of behaviour and knowledge" (Reckwitz 2000: 184; translated from the German).² In other words, actions and practices are rendered accessible and comparable through descriptions aiming to provide information rather than already categorise it according to pre-defined headings. Nor should we understand these descriptions as precisely mirroring an artist's intentions, thoughts, etc.—which is obviously impossible—but as bringing into view, and providing insights, into the relational dynamics involved. Known as a "practice approach," this method can be "demarcated as all analyses that (1) develop an account of practices [...] or (2) treat the field practices as the place to study the nature and transformation of

1 This information has been shared at the symposium "Art • Life • Technology", organised by FOA-FLUX, Sristhi Institute of Art, Design and Technology, and swissnex India; speakers and discussant see <http://foa-flux.net/art-life-technology/>; and conference "Action Art. The role of artists and art strategies in civic empowerment and transformation processes," organised by FOA-FLUX, BUILD UP, and Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK); speakers and discussant see <http://foa-flux.net/action-art-conference/>.

2 The original passage reads: "Man muss diese Handlungserklärungen nur richtig verstehen: Nicht als Aussagen über eine ontologisch distinkte Sphäre ‚in den Köpfen‘ der Handelnden, sondern als informative Neubeschreibungen von Praktiken [...] und auf diese Weise ‚erklärbar‘ macht, indem sie neuartige Ausdruckshypothesen bezüglich der jeweiligen Relation von Verhalten und Wissen formuliert."

their subject matter" (Schatzki 2001:11).

The second part of this essay—hopefully—presents helpful terms and concepts for analysing art and change processes. Needless to say that when studying "artists working reality," I favour a practice approach instead of one adhering to ideal-type notions. Here, among others, I follow Jens Kastner's "Art and Activism. (Against Groys)": all too often "categorisations produced by academic viewpoints" make "little difference in reality." I would even go a step further and argue that due to the current disposition of art discourses, such pre-defined categorisations not only make little difference in reality, but also impede our understanding of current transformation processes and their potentials. Informative descriptions and a practice approach, however, help us to understand how our notions of art are broadened and altered by these practices, and how potentials thereby open up for particular groups, life conditions, and disciplines. But let me first explain why such in-depth descriptions are needed in art discourses.

The academic art discourses problematised here are currently widely discussed, for example in the art criticism and theory journals *October* 130 (2009) and *Field Notes* 1 (2012). Due to the accelerated developments underway since the 1970s, along with the subsequent shift to a multi-centred art world, existing concepts of art are undergoing constant re-categorisation. These developments are not confined to the arts and profoundly influence our lives. I have written elsewhere about these change processes and the pressure thereby exerted on understandings of art and their effects on current art developments (Lämmli 2012, 2014).

Art in motion. While studying these change processes, I became interested in the fact that more and more artists worldwide are focusing on "connecting people," on creating and forging ties among communities, and on fostering actions for altering living conditions through artistic means. Examples include Wooferten or Chingchun Warehouse in Hong Kong, Jatiwangi art Factory in Indonesia, Kër Thiossane in Dakar, The Ugly Indian in India, or the international network Hackteria. How do such art practices take place? In which settings? For which purposes? Driven by which motivations? Who plays which roles? How are practices related to glocal issues and dynamics? Trying to answer these

questions, it quickly becomes clear that criteria such as originality, innovation, and the newness of strategies or products—which are still key criteria in contemporary art discourses—are not really helpful when reflecting on these art practices and social transformation processes. Neither can we build on the notion of an artistic idea as a key entity. I believe that this fact, and the accelerated spreading of such art practices, will alter our understandings of art, and therefore should be taken into account in art theory.

Assumptions. As mentioned, many discourses have been discussing a multitude of projects interlinking art and life contexts. Some key aspects that are dealt with in these descriptions and critical reflections are participation, the reach of art, and its interlinkage with social and activist transformation processes (see, for example, Lee 2016 and 2014, Koh 2015, Mōri 2015, Finkelpearl 2014, Felshin 1995). The relevant literature quickly reveals that the stories of art intersecting with social and activist transformation processes are told very differently, refer to different histories of origins, and are informed by various art notions. I share Tom Finkelpearl's view that "of course participation in the collective creation of art is not new. Across the globe, throughout recorded history people have participated in the creation of art — from traditional music and dance to community festivals to mural arts" (Finkelpearl 2014). Finkelpearl's narrative evidently builds on a broad understanding of art, one that exceeds the limited reach of an art notion still at work in many art theoretical discussions. These are centred on criteria such as innovation, originality, ambiguity and on an understanding of authenticity that fails to acknowledge the variety of contexts. But it is exactly these criteria that inform and often advance normative claims in discussions on art and change processes, and that lead to value judgements about whether something is art or not. Only rarely, however, are the assumptions underlying these valorisations made explicit. Which role do, could, or indeed should these criteria play when discussing the motivations, actions, and aims of art and change processes? Which criteria are key? Those used by academics, or those used by the practitioners in the field? There is no getting around disclosing one's assumptions if we intend to discuss current art phenomena in our multi-centred (art) worlds as accurately as possible. But, unfortunately, we are still in a phase when discussions on art and social transformation processes all too often turn into ideological debates, masking the (perhaps unconscious) objective to prolong

the life of problematised concepts — problematised because they do not square with the facts and phenomena.

Art—notArt. Whereas connecting people, interlinking art and life contexts, has become a promising strategy to articulate ideas of “better living” in practical settings, the art discourse still too often refutes this practice as “not being art.” Often, participatory art forms are still viewed critically from the outset. Below, I outline a reasoning still prevalent in German-speaking art discussions, as heard yet again at a recent panel discussion at the Center for Literary and Cultural Research between philosophers Juliane Rebentisch and Alexander García Düttmann, and moderated by literary scholar Eva Geulen and art historian Peter Geimer.

“Mitmachkunst.” Among European art historians, the suspicion that art loses its capability of being art when interlinked with social transformation processes is widespread. In German, for example, the word “Mitmachkunst” connotes a negative value judgement. Mitmachen translates as “to participate” or “to take part,” and Kunst is “art.” “Mitmachkunst” is often uttered in a tone of voice that leaves no doubt that the speaker believes that such art, *Mitmachkunst*, should not be considered art. Whenever this term crops up in discussions, it is often followed by the word “fig leaf.” In the Christian story of God’s creation of humanity, the fig leaf plays a central role. The first people God created were Adam and Eve (NIV, Genesis 2:15–17). They lived in the Garden of Eden, a place with plenty of food. They were allowed to eat anything except from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—but, of course, they ate from the forbidden tree. The fruit made them conscious of their nakedness and, realising that they were biologically different, they became aware of their privates. It has long puzzled me that this observation should be so far-reaching. Instead of explaining this, the biblical narrative focuses on the sense of shame and the covering of the privates with fig leaves. Therefore, the fig leaf, in this thought context, denotes concealing what causes shame. So when German-speaking art historians speak of “Mitmachkunst” and refer to fig leaves, listeners belonging to that thought context understand matters along the following lines: there is something to be ashamed of, which should not be seen, and therefore must be hidden. So when transferred to social contexts and art, this metaphor is seen to hide a grievance about social conditions. Instead of changing what causes unequal relations in

society, art in this view is mere eyewash for making governmental shortcomings more acceptable to the many. This criticism receives even more support when such art practices are initiated or even funded by governmental agents and institutions.

Art as human practice. This, however, is only one side of the disapproval leveled at "Mitmachkunst." Equally important are the limits of an art notion that rests on pre-defined intrinsic values used to evaluate the quality of art. For those who speak of "Mitmachkunst," this art notion includes the belief that artistic achievements and works of art have to be measured in normative-evaluative terms, as philosopher Georg W. Bertram (2014) suggests in "Kunst als menschliche Praxis" (Art as human practice). For Bertram and many others, the so-called autonomy paradigm and aesthetics are the reference points for art production. Although no one in Contemporary Art would seriously claim that art notions do not shift in time, and always express social and historical conditions, the art concepts employed to normatively evaluate these changes are considered universal. The obvious contradiction between describing a practice as "human" and approaching that practice through universal and yet highly limiting normative-evaluative relata is still not examined sufficiently within either art history or philosophy.

Canons. In her "Introduction: Canons and Art History," art historian Anna Brzyski highlights four "interrelated assumptions" of classical European art history. The first assumption is that "the concept of art is not synonymous with the entire spectrum of production that potentially can be or is identified as art at any historic moment" (Brzyski 2007:17). I have touched on these differences between art notions when discussing Tom Finkelpearl's broad notion of art. Now, this assumption is at work not only when considering art in global contexts (i.e., art production in different geographical and cultural contexts), but also when considering art rooted in ritual, folk, and ethnic traditions — be these European, Asian, African, Australian, South or North American. In short, classical European art history has never aimed to cover and discuss all art production or art as a human practice, but merely that particular—limited—range within that production that fits its pre-defined value criteria.

The peer dynamics in the so-called professional art world have nurtured the

constant exclusion of other art, as noted, for instance, by art historian Shifra Goldman, whose work on Latino art tried to “deflect and correct the stereotypes, distortions, and Eurocentric misunderstandings that have plagued all serious approaches to Latino Art history since the 50s” (1994:36–37).³ She observed that Chicano art, for instance, “which appeared modestly on the scene in the late 1960s [...] was ignored by almost all professionals in the art world.” She also pointed to the interrelation of political conditions and their effects on the U.S. art scene as a factor that may have helped render certain art forms invisible: “It has been my experience that converging art and politics, or even art and a social conscience, was disparaged in the United States from the late 1940s on (for excellent historical reasons, including the cold war and the McCarthyite attack on free speech)” (1996:xvi).

To return to Brzyski: the second assumption of classical European art history, as she points out, and which I have reiterated as a generally accepted fact, is that “art is by definition a historic phenomenon, a cultural tradition, and the history of that tradition can be studied, interpreted, and ultimately conveyed through art historic statements (textual, verbal, and/or visual)” (2007:17/18). Thus, art is in motion. Its constant transformation is inseparably linked with its being an expression of human reactions to given life contexts. The third assumption builds on the first two: “Art history does not deal with the entire spectrum of art practice but only with its *historically significant aspects*” (18). And, of course, the “*significant aspects*” are proclaimed by scholars and their peers and coincide with the disciplinary demands of classical European art history. The fourth assumption, so Brzyski, is that “art’s history is not affected by art historic discourses. Art’s history is, in other words, external and independent of art historic commentary. It is therefore empirically available for art historic narration, analysis, and interpretation” (2007:18). This assumption, in my view, does not necessarily need to be understood as a shortcoming, as long as the reach of “the classical paradigm” is acknowledged and opened up for comparative analyses. This is often not the case—and precisely here lies a fundamental crux. The consequences of this limited reach are rarely taken into consideration. Now, although it lies within the logic of this classical European art paradigm, one highly common criterion—the demand for self-reflection—applies

3 Cited on <http://www-stage.library.ucsb.edu/special-collections/cema/goldman>.

to Contemporary Art artists, but—astonishingly—*not* to academic art historians or philosophers working on Contemporary Art.⁴

The ghost “But is it art?” Accordingly, a significant part of current academic art discourse is still haunted by the question “But is it art?”⁵ Besides, many of the discourses revolving around headings such as participatory art, activist art, dialogic art, etc., talk about art and transformation processes based on established criteria—however problematised or inappropriate! But prescribing what art is, and what not, poses difficulties for discussing some central characteristics of art practices in life contexts. Such entrenched views render invisible from the outset what should actually be the centre of attention. Established art discourse leaves us blinkered, and oblivious to key dynamics and practices.

The previous remarks bring to the fore the ghost haunting the Contemporary Art discourse on art interlinking with social transformation processes. As Brzyskis rightly points out, this spectre involves not only the disregard of other art paradigms but also the belief that classical European art history builds on supposedly permanent truths. Again, in Brzyskis’ words, “Classical art history’s assumption that art has a history and that this history is external to and independent of art historic discourse” is directly linked to the belief that “phenomena are empirically available for observation and that the results of observation *are not* affected by the act of observing or by the production of analysis” (2007: 24). Here, we might ask, as Jens Kastner does in his critique of Groys’ “On Art Activism,” how come the findings of extensive studies on the relational and interdependent structure of observation have not been taken into account?

The prevailing inflexibility about questioning assumptions informing classical European art history is, in my view, key to the current, widely discussed crisis of art. The problematised art discourses are discussed in influential, opinion-shaping art journals like *October* and *Field Notes*. In “Art in Action: Making People Think!” (2014), I argued that “Whereas art discourse has been driven

4 Artists are expected to reflect on their activities and be able to outline their positions within the various current art traditions and practices (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu 2009).

5 See the title of Felshin’s book *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*.

into a state of disarray, art practice has rapidly expanded its importance, capacity, and possibilities. Art practice now co-inhabits an increasing number of other disciplinary and social domains. Its purpose—to inform and enrich everyday life, social processes, and scientific fields—has become enormous and is still growing.” In the last few decades, the category of contemporary art has changed its meaning, as a result of altered usages worldwide. As Hal Foster notes in the introductory remarks to his “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’”: “The category of “contemporary art” is not a new one. What is new is the sense that, in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment” (2009:1).

A canonical art notion. In “Coda: Canons and Contemporaneity,” art historian Terry Smith describes the crisis of art history as a result of a particular “Modernist Canon”: a string of modernist masters were “nominated by Greenberg and earlier formalists such as Roger Fry,” who in turn “became canonical” themselves. Crucially, this narrative “explicitly rejected many other justly celebrated artists, and it excluded entirely most of the major and persistent tendencies of twentieth-century art, especially those that turned on personal, social, or political engagement of some sort” (Smith 2007:316). This canonical usage, and the universal claim of a particular thought tradition, have both been problematised. What we need, however, is a broader, comparative discussion of relevant phenomena in art and global contexts, grounded in in-depth description and sound arguments. Therefore, we need not shirk what sociologist and art historian Jens Kastner criticises as “a structural thing within the art world that makes it possible to claim just about anything”—as long as our claims are nurtured by in-depth descriptions and robust arguments.

Modern art and its endeavour to interlink with life. The limited reach of a widely used narrow notion of art in classical European art history must not be seen as an ultimate consequence of an art tradition based on a modern, European art notion. Rather, it can be understood as a dogma driven by a canon and by peer-group dynamics. This has also been emphasised, for example, by philosopher Wolfgang Iser in his discussion of modern art and its endeavour to permeate life contexts (2012:91). Iser mentions various varieties of art that try to interlink with life and argues that the poles of these tendencies are attempts to integrate elements of everyday life into art on the one hand, and

attempts to transfer art into life on the other. He reminds us of Nietzsche's polemics against an "art of artworks" (*gegen die Kunst der Kunstwerke*): we should not concentrate on enhancing a bad (*schlechtes*) life through art, but use the energy of art (*Kunstenergie*) directly to alter existing life conditions. Nietzsche's demand brings us back to my introductory paragraph: looking at current art tendencies in global contexts, art practice is at the cutting edge when it comes to experimenting with and opening up future possibilities for what art can do, what its reach might be, and what its desired effects. Art theory, on the other hand, and here we come back to Welsch's argument, often misconstrues the interlinkage of art and life. Unfortunately, many art theorists try to come up with clear definitions of art for an art market eager to sell products possessing a distinct position within a commonly accepted ranking (Welsch 2012: 92). And, so Welsch, formulating classificatory innovations under such conditions is almost impossible.

Part One reviewed. Let me reiterate the well known and widely neglected fact that art practice and art discourses are context-bound. Various functions may be assigned to art practice. These functions may be outlined practically or theoretically, as one possibility among others, or valued as a normative entity. Due to ongoing globalisation, as well as glocalisation and localisation tendencies, "we are currently witnessing profound shifts in how art is understood, discussed, and practiced" (Lämmli 2014). We all know that a multitude of canons co-exists while at the same time a specific group remains largely oblivious to everything outside its canon. Why is this so? Does this denial spring from one of the most common reactions among human beings: fear? Perhaps. Perhaps it is uncanny to see one's thoughts challenged by other canons, other *relata*. In my view, multi-perspectivity, a comparative examination of various canons, is most helpful. It raises our awareness of our own thought context and its limitations. Multi-perspectivity enhances our possibilities of finding solutions to both real and conceptual problems. The complex dynamics in art and life that we are currently witnessing offer us a rich array of perspectives, descriptions, and normative claims. These await our comparative reflection—for a human practice and world yet to be constructed.

PART II

The second part of this paper suggests a list of terms, questions, and information useful for in-depth descriptions of how artists connect people to co-create better life conditions based on participatory step-by-step decisions and actions. The list is not exhaustive. It merely provides a starting point for reflecting on how “artists work reality” (Lämmli 2014) and which role connecting people might play in such projects. These reflections and in-depth descriptions might also assume the “thick descriptions” used in qualitative research (see Hahn 2013, Ponterotto 2006, Denzin 1989, Geertz 1973, Ryle 1949 and 1971). In Norman K. Denzin’s words, “description is the art of giving an account of something in words [...], thick descriptions [...] are deep, dense, detailed accounts [...], these accounts often state the intentions and meanings that organize actions” (2001:98). And, so Denzin, any description is always already an interpretation.

Such a compilation of terms, questions, and information useful for in-depth descriptions is needed due to the current state of art discourse (outlined in Part I). It might be useful to art students and artists alike. Practical solutions seldom fit pre-defined concepts. And especially in times of change, which affect our reference systems and problematise existing notions of art, detailed accounts of particular projects are needed. We are looking for descriptions that are based on practical know-how and experience, which support reflection, further action in practical *and* theoretical domains, and which provide a basis for activities related to existing contexts and for topics relevant within these contexts. While writing, I was thinking primarily of artists and practitioners, in an attempt to suggest tools for describing projects without relying solely on existing art categories and criteria. Such tools are needed based on at least two observations: (1) While the existing categories and values of art are widely debated and problematised, the consequences of this debate are difficult to foresee (see Part I). (2) And, as Finkelpearl (2014) points out in “Participatory Art,” the discussion on art and participatory practices, and therefore also on connecting people, “seems to be in its infancy” (see also Crossick/Kaszynska 2016). However, we do not need new concepts or terms, but greater awareness of the limitations of the so-called art expert paradigm and its criteria. We need to contextualise paradigmatic claims by revealing their underlying assumptions. Similar demands are also made

in other disciplines and domains. We are currently witnessing an increasing awareness of the complexity of newly emerging fields in art, science, and life contexts. This calls for plural viewpoints, just as the notion of "expertise" needs to be questioned. In *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (2015), Isabelle Stengers argues that "making divergences present" is not primarily about "respect for differences of opinion." Instead, "divergent knowledges," activated by multi-perspectival approaches, leads to re-thinking and deceleration. According to Stengers, "the achievement of an alloying, of a practice of the heterogeneous, doesn't require a respect for differences but an *honoring of divergences*." What is crucial is "*what the other makes matter, what makes him or her think and feel*" (143).

This should also be our central point when describing how artists work reality and connect people. *How to talk about it? What do we want to "make matter?"* Bell Hooks, the African American feminist and cultural critic, made the same point in her acclaimed book *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (1995). We should carefully choose what we talk about, because what we make visible matters.

Let us remember:

WHAT WE SEE AND MAKE SEEN IS WHAT WE MAKE MATTER!

So when describing how artists work reality and connect people, let us reference and contextualise art criteria. Let us provide narrative descriptions instead of normative ones. And let us reflect on premises and question their validity. If unreflected art criteria guide our descriptions, the essential dynamics and interrelations of a project will most likely be blurred. More promising seems a description that establishes its own frame of reference through revealing a project's key *aspects, dynamics, motivations, expectations, aims, and influences*. Establishing intrinsic criteria as a frame of reference is of course not new within the discourse on art practice. While students on our MA Fine Arts at Zurich University of the Arts are encouraged to establish the relevant value criteria by building on the work itself, they still remain within the limits of the Contemporary Art discourse. I propose taking matters a step further: namely, to describe the project without already including an unreflected value judgement about what is art or not. Let us observe, reflect, interpret, and discuss *before* we judge. Participation, as Liesbeth Huybrechts, head of the Inter-actions research unit at LUCA School of Arts in Belgium, puts it, "stands in contrast to

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this 'cult of the specialist,' wherein an expert is expected to provide answers to certain questions" (2014:12).

While writing this text, I had in mind descriptions of existing projects. However, the given cues and prompts might also help to plan projects. The suggestions made here are based on notes taken over many years, on our FOA-FLUX workshops and questionnaires devised for conferences, symposia and discussion rounds, and on the cited publications.

How can you make your description as precise as possible? Often, we have to come up with short descriptions. Our main focus should therefore lie on providing the key aspects—which are not always obvious. Therefore, it is essential to narrow down the terms and questions best fitting the project.

Whenever we describe a project, it will take time to identify the important details and leave aside the more dispensable ones. Let's choose in relation to the action we want to describe! And let's keep in mind, more often than not, that key aspects might change while writing. So, we might start with one set—and, following reflection, end up with a different one.

Here's a straightforward but by no means simplistic way: a few months ago, Annemarie Bucher, my colleague at FOA-FLUX, and I came up with "The 5 W's" at a workshop we were running on co-creation for the lecturers and researchers of two Swiss art universities:

Who? For Whom? Where? What? When?

We aimed to reduce to the maximum the enormous amount of information on how to connect people in collaborative and co-creative teams. We were looking for an aide-mémoire, i.e., a tool that would help us see the different expectations and requirements informing co-creation throughout the work process. We decided to subsume the "why?" and "who funds?" under the 5 W's, allowing them to come into play at all times. Because we are used to working in co-funding settings, where all partners (often) contribute according to their means and possibilities, these questions render collaborative support more visible and value all contributions. We also recommend answering these questions by closely examining the different project phases.

The “5 W’s” is a “minimized-to-the-maximum” tool set for describing projects.

We propose dividing a project’s phases into:

RESPECT | CONNECT | EXCHANGE | VALUE

RESPECT stands for the initiation phase, where building trust and bonding are essential for any collaborative production of content. CONNECT stands for the negotiation period, where interests are negotiated and their intersection outlined to provide enough space for these interests. EXCHANGE describes actual collaborative production and exchange. Most importantly, collaborative practice should remain visible during the final phrase, VALUE, when the project is communicated.

As a first step toward a more detailed approach to how “artists work reality” and which role connecting people plays within projects, we could start with the question:

Why connect people?

The answer to this pivotal question should include our guiding assumptions, motivations, and aims. Any action is always informed by a particular context or setting. Our descriptions, moreover, obviously build on our previous analyses, which include much more information. It is also advisable to start from a macro-perspective or, figuratively, from a bird’s-eye-view, i.e., to provide an overall description before moving to the micro-level. How best to describe the context, to reveal the project’s essential aspects? Is the context best described as *thought-related, geographical, symbolical, (sub-, trans-)cultural, religious, disciplinary, educational, vocational, scholarly, practical, research, production, reception, folk, political, social, urban, local, gentrification, activist, etc.?*

How do people interact within that context (*interpersonal behaviour*)?

Some prompts: *Voicing out, having no voice, express, communicative, emotional, hidden, controlling or controlled, aspiring or striving, belonging, aggressive, hostile, friendly, (non-)assertive, direct, honest, angry, respectful, superior, marginalized, vengeful, anxious, (un)pleasant, self-confident,*

suppressive, strongly bonded, pleasant, collective, individual, lonely, caring, etc.

What are the key characteristics of that context?

From whose viewpoint?

Any context can be described from multiple angles and perspectives. Your viewpoint might be different from others—well actually, that is very likely going to be the case. Often, we might need to provide a short description. So how might the actual context best be described in relation to what you are doing (i.e., connecting people)?

Which perspectives should be part of the description?

Which assumptions inform these particular viewpoints?

Which belief systems, habitus, modes of relationship and interaction, traditions (thought, art, life, cultural, ect.) inform the given context?

At our FOA-FLUX events, we often ask presenters to address the following questions:

Who started the project?

Why was it started?

Where and when did it take place?

Who financed the project? Which requirements go along with the funding?

Who has an interest in the project taking place?

Who are the beneficiaries?

Who are the addressees?

Who is organizing and managing the participatory exchange?

What are the different expectations about the project? Whose are they?

Which key questions or aims guide the project?

Which role do you play as an artist in the specific project context?

Which art notions inspire your work in that particular project?

Which skills, ideas, beliefs, and artistic strategies do you bring in?

How is/are which community/communities involved?

What kind of (art) strategies, formats, and forms are used?

Which role do the specific artistic strategies, methods, and modes of production play?

What are they used for?

Considering the phenomena described above as “artists working reality,” not all of these projects aim to produce art as a final goal. Art might be involved as a way of achieving other objectives. And yet the dynamics, processes, and outcomes involved might nevertheless affect our understanding of art. *How are these art strategies used? By whom? In which context? What function do these art strategies play within this given context? How are they related to the particular participatory practice used in the project?*

A broad understanding of art already exists. Among others, an object, a process, or an event could be art. In “Participatory Art” (2014), Finkelpearl notes: “In some cases, participation by a range of people creates an artwork, in others the participatory action is itself described as art.” To exemplify how participation creates an artwork, Finkelpearl refers to a work by Wendy Ewald, who “gave cameras and photography training to a group of children in a village in India, who, in turn, depicted their community, and where the resulting photography show was considered participatory art.” To illustrate that participatory action itself might be considered art, Finkelpearl refers to Pedro Lasch’s work: “On the other hand, the multimedia visual artist Pedro Lasch collaborated with a group of “Sonidero” DJ’s on a party at an art center in Mexico City, and he called the social interactions leading to, and including, the public event an artwork co-authored by a range of participants—including the people who simply showed up for the event.” (2014:1)

When *art* is the main goal of a project, how does this interrelate with including others in production? *Who experiences and benefits what? Who is named in the end, receives credit, and, if the work is sold, the revenue? But even if art is not the main objective, it is crucial to consider the envisaged, symbolic, and actual benefits, and whose motivations, expectations, and aims are fulfilled in which ways. And, of course, who plays which roles.*

Roles, motivations, expectations & aims. Different stakeholders (*artist, organisers, initiator, associates, participants, addressees, beneficiaries*) will quite likely have different *motivations, expectations, and aims* about a project. The stakeholder concept is widely used to analyse social processes in various scientific disciplines, such as science management, policy area analyses, urban

planning, etc. Ejderyan et. al. (2006), examining the term “stakeholder” as a sociological concept, and focusing on micro-politics in the context of river planning, point out that the English word refers to both participants *and* affected persons. Participants, for example, might be part of *opinion building*, and/or involved in *decision making*, or belong to *the target group of certain measures or actions*. In the latter, the stakeholders might be persons whose interests are or could be affected by the decisions, projects, and politics involved. These interests might not even be directly related to the concrete situation. For example, some stakeholders might be interested because—indirectly—existing power relations are changed and their own social position affected as a result. Active and passive stakeholders can be distinguished as follows: *active stakeholders* are able to influence decisions while *passive stakeholders* are exposed to the decisions of others (2006:80). Hence, the criteria distinguishing active and passive stakeholders are having (1) *the possibility and the power to influence the project process* and/or (2) *the intention to actually influence it*. Another distinction is that between primary and secondary stakeholders. Here, Ejderyan et. al refer to Grimble & Wellard (1997:176). *Primary stakeholders* are the (potential) beneficiaries of the project. *Secondary stakeholders* (for example, planners) take part in the project because they are somehow connected (for example, ex officio) or directly or indirectly affected by the project. Ejderyan et. al. point out that in the context of political and network analysis all agents and their respective social contexts need to be considered to properly understand project realisation (2006:81). This is also the case when talking about art projects and how artists connect people: to properly understand the dynamics, we need to distinguish the different roles, motivations, expectations, and aims of the various stakeholders.

Who is part of the decision making?

Who is directly or indirectly affected by the project or actions?

Who benefits? Who doesn't?

Examining stakeholder roles, motivations, and aims also draws attention to *what is relevant for whom*. This, in turn, raises awareness of where the potential conflicts between stakeholder objectives and interests lie.

Before we move from the macro- to the micro-level and focus on the aspect of connecting people, let me summarise: introducing prompts, terms, and

questions for descriptions on the macro-level, I began by asking: *Why connect people?* Next, I suggested that we describe the (1) context, (2) viewpoints, (3) stakeholders, and (4) roles, motivations, expectations, and aims.

On a micro-level: Connecting people

On the micro-level, let us describe *how people are connected, by whom, and why*. Finkelpearl's three modes of participation (2014) are helpful in this respect. The proposed subcategory of participatory art offers a clearer understanding of how and for which purposes participation and art are interrelated. It also helps to clearly position the goals and reach of artists connecting people to co-create better life conditions. I will refer to the key assumption of Denzin's interpretive interactionism (2001), consider Drake and Heath's emphasis on *self-reflexivity* (2011), and adapt Diana Leonard's characteristics of activist research to our task. These approaches will inform the terms and questions for descriptions. I will close with some remarks on why descriptions of artists working reality and connecting people make an important contribution to current change processes.

Relational, activist, and antagonist modes of participation art.

Finkelpearl (2014) suggests three different modes of participation art: relational, activist, and antagonist. He distinguishes these modes in terms of the different motivations, aims, and contexts informing participatory projects. Thus, *relational participation* refers to projects aiming to establish temporary, small-scale social events in an art context. For instance, he refers to the work of the Argentine-Thai-American artist Rirkrit Tiravanija and Bourriaud's concept of "Relational Aesthetics." Starting in the early 1990s, Tiravanija initiated "a series of exhibitions that consisted of cooking pad thai (a Southeast Asian stir-fried noodle dish) for gallery visitors" (2014). Art itself was the social event and the visitors its active participants. Finkelpearl comments: "*Untitled (Free)* became Tiravanija's signature piece, appearing in shows in the United States, Europe, and Asia, and, in 1996, it was included in the exhibition 'Traffic,' the seminal show organized by the French critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud. In the show's catalogue, Bourriaud coined the term 'Relational Aesthetics' to refer to the sort of work that creates temporary and small-scale convivial moments and experiments in interpersonal relations that he hails as models for positive social interaction" (2014:3). Thus, relational participation in Finkelpearl's sense means

an event or experiment that is organised within an art context and that provides positive social interactions for those involved.

Activist participation, according to Finkelpearl, refers to art that alters given conditions in a community context. His example is the Project Row Houses (PRH), a Houston-based organisation initiated by artist and community activist Rick Lowe. The PRH webpage (projectrowhouses.org) states that it “shifts the view of art from traditional studio practice to a more conceptual base of transforming the social environment.” Project participants include artists, staff, residents, architecture students, planners, and visitors. Its mission is “to be the catalyst for transforming community through the celebration of art and African-American history and culture” (projectrowhouses.org). After a planning phase in the early 1990s, PRH launched in 1993. In terms of art, the Project Row Houses is often referred to as a neighbourhood-wide, interactive, participatory public sculpture (Finkelpearl 2014, Lowe/Maloney 2015). The activist mode of participation therefore experiments with what art can do, and in which ways it can be interlinked with and prove useful to regional and social development. Art in this context is primarily valued as a tool for and provider of capabilities aimed at initiating and enacting change processes, rather than as a product, event, or experiment for art consumers.

Describing **antagonist participation**, Finkelpearl refers to Cuban artist Tanja Bruguera’s installations and performances. Bruguera is “experimenting with power relations, working with participants who have not necessarily agreed to the terms of engagement, seeking no apparent social good” (Finkelpearl 2014). Bruguera aims to provide confrontational experiences among exhibition visitors by involving them in performative actions, creating situations—within art contexts—“that require the audience to respond, not simply observe” (Neuberger Museum of Art 2010). She calls these “Arte de Conducta” (“Behavior Art”). Finkelpearl suggests that this mode of participatory art “could be characterized as an example of destabilizing, contradictory, and/or antagonistic participatory art” (See also Claire Bishop 2012).

In summary, Finkelpearl’s distinction shows that the relational and antagonist modes of participation art produce art for an art context by inviting people to participate in interactions designed by artists. Their effectiveness is measured

in terms of the attention raised within the art context. Whereas the relational mode uses positive interaction settings, the antagonist mode seeks to provide uneasy, provoking experiences. The activist mode brings art practice into life contexts. Its effectiveness is measured by its ability to activate possibilities to improve existing conditions through artists and communities joining hands. It aims to make a "positive difference in people's lives" (Finkelpearl 2014).

Some further questions, phrases, and keywords

The following questions, phrases, and keywords are by no means complete. They provide a set of tools to choose from and to stimulate ideas about how to describe the reach, motivations, and aims of connecting people in particular projects. I have noticed that many descriptions of participatory art or community projects do not cover these dynamics, hence leaving unexplored how interactivity, empowering, and taking action are implemented. This shortcoming is unfortunate, since these dynamics uncover best how multiplicity, diversity, respect, and (g)local connection are honoured and productively brought into play.

When describing projects, let us keep in mind that a *description is already an interpretation* (Denzin 20012). Also, *putting oneself in the frame* is part of becoming reflexive (Drake/Heath, 2011:43 ff.). Adapting Diana Leonard's description of Activist research (in Drake/Heath, 2011:40), let us closely examine *how connecting people interlinks with empowering processes*. In which ways does the description of connecting people *contribute to understanding the given conditions and possible activations for change? How does the connecting people interlink with negotiation processes? What is negotiated? In which particular ways does connecting people reveal what should be changed? What are relations like between those connected? Is connection temporary? Is it limited to a certain period of time? What kind of commitments are involved? What role does the connector play? Does this role change during the connecting stages? How could these stages be best described? Is the connection sustainable? Does it end with the activator moving on?*

Describing *who is addressed, included, and connected by which means and how the connecting process takes place and evolves during its various phases*

provides insights into the value sets, empowering dynamics, and the roles and respect among those involved.

Why connecting people? To achieve or provide what exactly? What is the envisaged outcome? At which stage does the outcome become clear? In which ways is the outcome defined? In which ways is it undefined?

Is the goal of connecting people process-orientated? Object/product-orientated? Open-ended?

Forms of connecting and negotiating?

How is connecting people interlinked with empowering?

How does it contribute to understanding the given conditions in order to change these?

How does connecting interlink with negotiation processes?

What is negotiated?

In which ways does connecting people reveal what should be changed?

What are relations like between those connected?

Is the connection temporary?

What kind of commitments are involved?

Which role does the connector play?

Is the connection sustainable?

How do people interact?

What are relations like between those connected?

Is trust established? Bonding? On equal terms?

How are people connected? Which forms, means, and methods are used?

Who plays which role?

Who has which expectations?

Which motivations, expectations, and aims inform the action of "connecting people" at which stage?

Which don't you consider relevant?

Which uncertainties go along with the project?

Which conscious negotiations take place?

Which unconscious negotiations take place?

Here come some prompts for your answers:

Roles of agents/participants:

passive, active, (decision) makers, users, audience, spectator, affected, influenced.

Actions, reasons, resources:

Call on communities to do things

Organise meetings and gatherings for people to discuss particular issues

Share, exchange, gather, change, critique, introduce, reflect, disseminate, receive, provide, collect, negotiate, influence, shape, produce, invent, visualise, question, develop, evaluate, explore, compare, document, ideas/data/knowledge /know-how/opinion/learning methods/conditions/objects/practices/examples/ interests/experience

Come up together with actions, work with complexity

Change ways of seeing, reading, listening, talking

Make sth visible, known, spread, attractive, known, aware of ...

Personal expression of the artist, expression of the many

Unusual lateral views on things

Convey through hints and ambiguities

Confront dominant visions, situations, settings for exchange

Advocate certain practices of amateur tinkering

Abstract, imagine, pretend, re-present, fantasise, guess, re-interpret, experience, observe, measure, translate, compare, describe, layout, memorise, customise, exemplify, catalyse, experiment, imagine

Inspire, motivate, and initiate social processes

Hand-draw maps, lab-meets-kitchen, re-inhabit urban space, reflect on technical possibilities and dangers, support diversity, local production,

interactive guides for exploring the place, provide services (food, haircut, education programmes ...), organise meetings, festivals, events, film screening

suggest/develop alternative ways of seeing, producing, economy ...

Examples of empirical, imaginary evidence, facts, myths ...

“Low barriers for artistic production and civic engagement” (Huybrechts,

30), "Informal mentorship," "fostering citizen control," "delegate power and partnership" (Huybrechts, 30)

Provide social connection, build social capital, observe, design

Accumulate, comment, re-mix, archive, construct, consult, initiate, promote, celebrate, improve, heal, regenerate, conciliate, identity-building, story-telling, history-building, communal-building, allow/provoke emotions, encourage understanding, extend the notion of sth, change mind-sets, initiate self-help, create space for sth, promote ways of sharing, zoom in on sth, ask questions openly, redefine sth, urban trekking, solve a problem, test grounds, emphasise social/local/glocal/global issues, spontaneous, social collective, precision vs ambiguity, work-centered, action-orientated, (joint) learning, teaching, guided by the community, talking – receiving, blur positions, techniques, skills, beliefs & assumptions, thought-context, motivation, strategic interests, aims, content interests, social standing, analysing tools, perceptions, emotions.

Issue-based, process-based, product-based, new scientific explanations, mind-body, universal belief systems, rational discourse, goal-orientated, process-orientated, making science attractive for the public, new technologies, ethics, help to understand, negotiate interdisciplinary interests, practical negotiations, making science attractive for the public, re-define artistic practice, catalyse moments of "not knowing."

Participation framework, scientific, artistic, every-day, aesthetic, ethical, social, physically, mentally, imaginary

Local materials, traditional construction techniques, tracking stock or resources, collective knowledge, tangible assets

Time aspect:

temporary, long-running, occasional, alternating, recurring, once only.

These tools for describing connecting processes might contribute to more closely considering the practices of connecting people and their interrelations with art. The above pool fulfils its task if it opens up a space for the discussion and interpretation of relations, interactions, situations, contexts, negotiation processes,

and so on.

At a time when collaboration and participation are highly valued for their potential to accompany change processes actively fostered by activist art, economics, politics, the sciences, development cooperation, spatial planning, social work, management studies, etc., we need in-depth descriptions to ground interpretation, future reflection, and action. Most of all, we need descriptions of artists connecting people and working reality to further activate potentials and actions. The perhaps unprecedented popularity and belief in art and creativity to affect and foster well-being needs to be contextualised within and interpreted from a perspective firmly anchored in practice. This should not be left to theoretical descriptions based on categories and concepts rooted in understandings of art that traditionally exclude and devalue certain phenomena, which have become prominent in our times and are continuing to expand strongly.

These descriptions and discussions of how artists work reality might stimulate (re)thinking the interactions of art, creativity, and social capital. The latter, as Shardlow, quoting the World Bank's definition of social capital (1999), points out, "refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions." Moreover, "social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society—it is the glue that holds them together" (Shardlow 2010:229).

The descriptions of how artist work reality might also provide a better idea of how various professional groups address and bring into play change processes. For example, I have noticed that the work done by artists in community contexts is often viewed as a kind of social work. But at the same time, I have also heard that artists go about things quite differently, even when using the same artistic strategies as social workers. How can these professional groups combine their practical and conceptual know-how for the better? What are their professional particularities? How to interrelate multiple interests in a way that honours each contribution and improves the capabilities of everyone involved?

Due to their particular education and practice, artists are often familiar with process-oriented and open-ended procedures. Often they are pragmatic and

practice-based, used to an inclusive approach to multiple-perspectives, as well as flexible and passionate when developing something they believe in is at stake. They are often used to wearing various hats, to changing between the positions of listeners, viewers, and producers. Therefore, artists can draw on a wide range of competencies, bringing technical, practical, conceptual, and entrepreneurial knowledge and skills into many societal and scientific fields. Their impact should by no means be underestimated.

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