

Interview Matthias Ulrich with Vanja Vukovic

1) Public space is a closely contested realm. Michel de Certeau moreover describes this space as the result of all activities occurring within that space. Why is it important as an artist to participate in these public struggles or activities, and what is there to be gained?

Considering who is allowed to shape public space, it is primarily industrial, economical, state and public interests. How do public spaces in our cities differ from one another – the degree of security paired with forfeited creative freedom? How 'private' can you be in public spaces and with limited personal scope of activity? Do I have a choice? Do I participate in the 'whore city' (not the religious Babylonian, but the ghettoized)? Globalization has a different impact on various urban districts: both advantageous and disadvantageous.

In principle, I am concerned with a science fiction-esque language, assuming the victory over corporate actions by acting in the interest of the private. How much privacy is public and how much public private? A kind of creative engagement emerges, by being able to make decisions and taking responsibility.

2) Saskia Sassen distinguishes between public space and publicly accessible space. What are your expectations of public space? Antiquity's agora or modern mall?

I basically see antiquity's agora being replaced by the modern mall as an entertainment program. I am actually concerned with the reconstruction of veto and objection, to be able to pose questions – meaningful or not – to the bourgeois-capitalistic modernity and its profanity or narcissism ('transcendental homelessness', Georg Lukács) on the one hand, and on the other hand I want to give a voice to members of social classes whose status might not permit them to even voice an opinion. The streets or any place for congregation are best suited for that.

3) In recent years, the term social turn has been discussed in art theory. It stands for the integration of social processes and their alteration through artistic interventions and activities. How do you and your work refer to social turn?

I see it as an opportunity for collaboration, exchange and dialog in the sense of it being a responsibility, not as an exploitation and exoticism or esoterics with "real" people (i.e. not friends, colleagues, acquaintances). But it not some type of teaching. The people, basically, have an influence on the project and its result.

4) French philosopher Jacques Rancière puts emphasis on the creativity of the viewer, which an artwork could initiate. Shared creativity between the artist and the viewer, arranged in the participatory work of art, offers opportunities for new activities. Does this practice – sooner or later – render the artist redundant?

Is there still social innovation in art – the revolution in communication? In the end it is a process of continuous change: a never ending act-react-coincidence. The question whether it will ever be resolved is superfluous.

5) What does it mean to you, if the production as well as the appropriation of artwork includes the activity of other people – artists, non-artists, the audience?

I am offering participation and a place within the creative society of a project. On the one hand it is the interplay of fiction and reality, and on the other hand I want to understand people.

6) What are your experiences so far with projects that have required the active participation of the public, particularly in relation to their production and realization?

Public space is a sphere everyone is involved in. In that sense, it is interesting that there is no need to compromise. Precisely the thought of not choosing or selecting (in as far as objectivity is at all possible), and of being able to get involved with people you might not have chosen, had you made a plan upfront, makes a difference. The juxtaposition of public and privacy, their limits as well as their representative role, are interesting. What actually is existentialist participation or even the term public opinion?

What kind of changes is the public subjected to? We are not meeting in a Café or at the round table, but in the streets, and the confrontation with my camera demands a reaction, requires the protagonist to communicate.

Interactivity reduces the level of anonymity. It is always exciting to see the resulting reactions and where the limits are in the age of 2.0.

7) Within participatory art we can differentiate between performers and co-creators. Art as an idea and the result as social work?

As an artist, I am no “social worker” in this project, I don’t want to decorate the town or participate in town planning. But I want to involve strangers, and interact with them. The project is not supposed to be pleasing, and I reject usability in relation to a capitalism of the senses. I am interested in conflicting elements.

8) Jean-Luc Nancy is critical of community in the sense of its creating a common-being, having been awarded a quasi religious identity. Pluralism, according to Boris Groys, is the principal value created by a participatory practice. Apart from another successful operation of the communication of the art system, why do contemporary artists cooperate, collaborate, and work with artist’s collectives?

At this point I would like to use my audience-lifeline Wikipedia. According to Lacan transparency in communication does not exist, at least not verifiably, constructively.

Is it going to work or not?

Questions about syndicates, friction, confrontation, insight, uniformity and opportunism are raised.

9) A large part of participatory art refers to happening or theatre. The invisible theatre, a form of discourse originated in 1920’s Soviet Union, entirely relinquished the separation of actor and audience. How do you and your work relate to theatre?

Theatre always comes into it – as an actor in the public space within this art event (per se definition of theatre). I try to involve people – leave reality and enter the art process, an emotional participation, unsettling the audience in a rebellious way. A pause in amazement – it is good to be vexed sometimes.

10) How much importance do you attach to affecting the behavior of others with your art? What do you expect from the audience in general?

This is a bench test on reality, tackling the relationship of the private and public. At the best there is interest in mutual understanding and participation in thought.

I collect experiences. I observe people’s behavior, stir up mistrust and irritation, thus I also challenge the entire art project.

(Translated by Susie Hondl)