

CuMMA PAPERS #5

CuMMA (CURATING, MANAGING AND MEDIATING ART) IS A TWO-YEAR, MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME AT AALTO UNIVERSITY FOCUSING ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS PUBLICS. AALTO UNIVERSITY IS LOCATED IN HELSINKI AND ESPOO IN FINLAND.

ART OF ENCOUNTERS AN INTERVIEW WITH THE GROUP H.ARTA BY HELENA BJÖRK, HANNA OHTONEN & SELINA VÄLIHEIKKI

H.arta is a group of three artists; Maria Crista, Anca Gyemant and Rodica Tache. Based in Timișoara, Romania, they engage in artistic practice, education and activism. We became familiar with their work in the autumn of 2012 during their workshop called *How did you decide to work in the art field? (Art as methodology)* in Helsinki.

With a hands-on, theoretically informed approach, h.arta's work ranges from publications to social projects. During their workshop, which was part of a series of seminars titled *Theoretical Frameworks of Curating and Mediating Art*, h.arta presented us with feminist interventions, alternative forms of political activism and education as a means of critical knowledge production. They also talked about the importance of solidarity and introduced us to the concept of friendship as a methodology.

In mid-winter we returned to the engaging encounter with h.arta. We contacted them to ask about their open-minded work and their unique position in the expanding art field.

Let us start with a question that has been central to your exploration of the art field, the very question that you have often posed in your workshops: how did you decide to become artists?

We could say there were two decisions, first the decision to enroll in an art school, holding in our minds the stereotypical image of what art and artists could be. After this the real decision to work in the art field came when we started questioning the role of art in society and what could be done when using art in order to address issues such as inequality and unfairness.

How was the group h.arta formed?

H.arta emerged as a practical solution to our wish to find out what art could be. In 2001, when we began working as h.arta, we were in our early twenties and fresh graduates from the Art Academy in Timișoara. We shared a diffuse and generalised uneasiness about our position as artists in a context we felt was completely inadequate compared to our wishes and interests. We were deeply discontent with the obsolete education we had received in the Art Academy and we felt that the mainstream art field of Timișoara and Romania was provincial and out of sync. This was the general spirit of that period among artists interested in contemporary art, when periphery and being left behind were key words in the discussions about the field.

Part of the feeling of isolation had very concrete causes: traveling was still very difficult, for financial reasons and also because of border policies. But the isolation and the feeling of being left out were also more diffuse than a mere problem of mobility. The representative art of that period was an art that employed traditional media, such as painting and sculpture, in order to state an elitist, religious, conservative position. Changing the medium to discussions, performances, informal meetings, videos, etc. was an important necessity as well as changing the topics to an analysis of the conditions of art production and to the relation between art and everyday life.

In a moment when the institutional context of contemporary art was insufficient, we were creating our own institutions, our own contexts. Naively we thought this to be a way of getting closer to the experience of an imagined West with its beautiful, creative, hospitable contemporary art institutions. But also, beyond the political immaturity of that period, the wish to build our own context and space in a situation when we felt that our interests and wishes were marginal had its importance and value. This seemed much more possible in the conditions of a collective practice.

So what exactly does h.arta do?

We work with different forms and formats. Sometimes we organise programs of events for spaces that have different life spans, or we use the concept of publications as a means of making visible our ideas and as a ground for collaboration with other people and organisations. Also, in many of our projects we found the format of workshops to be a useful way of discovering and testing out ways of working together with others, of sharing knowledge and negotiating differences.

You have also published school books on different topics. What was the original inspiration for this?

The primary reasons were our practice as school teachers and our own strong interest in learning about issues that we consider very important – such as feminism – but which were not addressed in any way during our years of formal education. The issue of education and the interest in finding strategies of teaching and learning in a non-hierarchical, emancipatory way are central aspects of our practice as a group.

In recent years there has been a turn in the art field towards a socially engaging art that aims to produce less material and more knowledge. It seems that your practice is involved in this redefinition of art as agency. Would you agree?

We didn't set up an objective of redefining art but are more interested in developing a hybrid practice in which we employ different methods in order to understand the mechanisms of oppression and maybe, hopefully, help things change. We want to speak from our position as citizens without hiding behind art and culture as ways of de-radicalisation, but we still want to use the potential of imagination and creativity that exist in art.

We could say that in our projects thus far art has been a methodology, a frame that is sometimes useful and sometimes irrelevant. From time to time we label our work as art for strategic reasons. We also use mediums, sensibilities, formats and ways of thinking and working that are strongly related to art. We want to use the methods and practical ideas that come from our education and work as artists in order to create contexts in which new ways of looking at the world could emerge. However, whether we realise our projects in an artistic frame or completely step out from the field of art is not relevant to us.

You have often mentioned your friendship as an important part of what h.arta stands for. Is there a political dimension to this?

Our work as a group developed in parallel with our personal friendship and the two aspects – work and friendship – nurtured each other. In the majority of our projects our methodology is based on friendship, which we see both as a practice of collaborative learning as well as a political statement about solidarity. Being a field of negotiation, we consider friendship a complex mixture of emotions, conflicts, care, compromise and accountability towards each other. As such, it constitutes an important model in a world in which the mainstream neoliberal ideology is based on the alienation of people from one another and on the fragmentation of society. As a form of solidarity between people that are not tied by family relations, we consider friendship a useful tool against the worrying ubiquity of conservative discourses that declare “blood relations” the only meaningful tie between people, as well as for opposing the oppressiveness of heteronormativity.

Could you elaborate a little on the concept of solidarity?

Solidarity was a word used very often in communist times as part of the official discourse, and in this mostly hypocritical context it lost its meaning. It is quite difficult to use this word in the Romanian language – same as other important words such as equality or fairness, words that were misused during communist times. But, beyond this history of the word, the concept of soli-

arity itself is seen as unimportant, naïve or even dangerous in a time when the mainstream ideology is so strongly and unilaterally about saving yourself and about criminalising the ones who are in need. Because of this we think that in the present it is an important word to use and an important concept to enact.

How does the Romanian context resonate with you and your work?

For a long time the Romanian people lived in isolation. This isolation happened because in Romania for almost 45 years common people were not allowed to travel outside the socialist block and information about the “outside world” was carefully filtered. Even during the transition period traveling continued to be difficult because of financial reasons and because of the specific border policies for countries outside Shengen and the EU.

Probably one of the most powerful effects of isolation was a sort of romanticisation of the countries of the so-called West as realms of freedom, democracy and prosperity for everyone. With this, freedom was seen as being in direct connection with the free movement.

Meanwhile, many aspects of the Western countries and of the capitalist system were not accessible to all. Racism and limitation of movement for certain groups of people such as, for example, the foreign workers from the so-called Third World was happening still. Their limited freedom of travel and residence were, and continue to be, instruments for their economic discrimination and exploitation.

The longing for the so called free West

fueled the positive reception of the official discourses about the importance of joining EU and embracing neoliberalism without questions.

In the early nineties, after the end of the communist regime and during the period of transition in Romania, there was a phrase commonly used in the political speech throughout the entire ideological spectrum and broadly reproduced by the mass media: "Now, finally, Romania can start to belong to Europe again". This phrase was repeated either with sentimental references to the sacrifices of the 1989 revolution or with practical observations about the sacrifices needed to be made by the population in order to ensure the success of the transition and the process of joining the EU. In both cases it meant the same thing: the communist period was such a powerful abnormality that it had the ability not only to stop time and keep our country away from the developments of Europe but also to challenge its spatial perception.

In 2007 when Romania joined EU, the president of the country officially declared in front of the Parliament that the Romanian communist regime was illegitimate and criminal. By completely dismissing every emancipatory role that the communist period had, the current, all-encompassing capitalism was declared the only possible option.

This complicated relationship to our past and to the construction of Europe is an important part of most of our projects.

The project "What would you do in my place in Vienna?" was about expectations towards the West. Could you say something about your experience with this project?

We did this project in 2003 during a one month residency in Vienna. The project was about asking friends and collaborators from Timișoara what they would like to do if they stayed in Vienna for a month. We performed their wishes and sent postcards back home with documentation of them. These wishes – simple things connected to wishes of free time, happiness and evasion – were specific for a certain way of viewing the western countries as idyllic and faraway places.

Looking back at this project from the point in which we are now, the longing and idealisation seem very strange. But traveling to a country outside the Eastern block was almost impossible for most Romanian citizens before and even after 1989. Vienna and the West were idealised as a realm of freedom and normality – a word used a lot by politicians in the transition period when referring to the capitalist West.

Europe is currently seeing a rise in hostility and prejudice. Is this affecting your work in any way?

The present context with the worrying ubiquity of nationalist and racist stances is something that makes us question the roles and responsibilities of artists even more.

Things that were taken for granted for more than 60 years, such as free education, free healthcare and guaranteed pensions are starting to be dismantled. The uncertainty and unfairness that have become the norm in the conditions opened by the financial crisis are not new for people that were always precarious and marginalised. Even in communist times, when officially we were all equal, people did, for example, suffer for the colour of their skin, even if this suffering was not always visible. But what is new is the fact that the suffering of those who are not wealthy, white, healthy, competitive, educated or ruthless enough is now made official. With the financial crisis and the dismantling of the last traces of some sort of social solidarity, with concepts such as care and responsibility openly ridiculed in mainstream discourses and with “survival of the fittest” officially becoming the only valid rule, it is impossible not to be influenced and affected by all this, not to have more urgency in your topics and preoccupations.

How do you understand knowledge and its relation to empowerment?

We are very much interested in finding balance between a situated knowledge and a more general relevance, in finding ways of speaking about one’s own concrete situations without imprinting exoticism onto oneself. How to speak about very specific

contexts and still make them more broadly relevant? Who decides what is important? How can everyday intuitions be transformed into an intelligible language or lived situations into theory? How can theory be checked against lived situations?

We think that empowerment can be an ability to use situated knowledge in order to operate with intuitions and in order to shape intuitions into language – to transform what is personal into political.

We find the publication “See me as I am” to touch on these subjects. Could you say a few words about this and tell us about the project?

In 2009 and 2010 we co-authored a project titled See me as I am. Words and Images of Roma Women with a mixed group of Roma and non-Roma women. One of the outcomes of this project was a manual, a book intended to be used in high schools for debating the issues of racism, sexism and marginalisation as well as offering solutions for effectively addressing them.

The book analyses how the image of Roma women and the way it is constructed are connected to the appearance of stereotypes. It also examines the practice of marginalisation and exclusion in a society whose main urge is the multiplication of capital, based on continuous isolation and poverty of certain people.

With this publication we wanted to address both those who are marginalised, in hope that it will become an instrument of analysis and change, and those in the majority who need to become aware of their own privileged situation, be it the privilege of being white, male, of higher class or so

forth. We were not interested in saving the ones who are marginal and excluded in a paternalistic, hypocritical way of projecting the problems that need to be solved elsewhere on the realm of the Others. Examining our own inherent hierarchies and manifestations of hidden racism and thinking about the ways in which we all contribute to a society that marginalises and exploits are the first steps in acting in solidarity with the ones that are excluded.

How do you view working in the art field today, as opposed to when you graduated?

Of course the conditions of the art field, and of society in general, are very different now than ten years ago. When we graduated the most important thing seemed to consist of making an opposition towards the mainstream art of that period and towards the anachronism of the art education system. In opposition to the perpetual avoidance in the mainstream art we were interested in changing forms and formats and addressing topics that were closer to the everyday reality and our social conditions.

While doing this we were still acting inside the art field and its institutions. Although we continue to work this way, we have, in the recent years, become more interested in what we could achieve with our modest power as citizens who happen to be artists. Some of our long term projects, for example a project about anti-racist education that we just started, steps almost completely outside of the art field.

HELENA BJÖRK has a background in art education and literature studies. She graduated from Aalto University in 2010 with a master's thesis on knitted graffiti as a feminist expression in public space. Her interests range from unexpected encounters with art to interdisciplinary practices. Björk is currently studying for an MA in Curating, Managing and Mediating Art while working as an independent curator and writer in Finland and Norway.

HANNA OHTONEN has graduated with an MA in Fine Art from Central Saint Martins in London in 2006 and worked as an artist in London and Helsinki. Alongside the studies in CuMMA she is currently freelancing as a writer. She is interested in working with art as a method of investigation and conversation.

SELINA VÄLIHEIKKI holds a BA in Textile Design from the University of Lapland (Rovaniemi) and is now focusing on MA studies in Curating, Managing and Mediating Art at Aalto University (Helsinki). She has been organising cultural events, both on an institutional and grassroots level and is motivated by collaborations with a DIY mindset. She is interested in the power of humour and was inspired by h.arta's thoughts about friendship as methodology.