

CUMMA PAPERS #13

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.

THE WAY OUT

ZONES FOR DEMOCRATIC CONFLICT

AN INTERVIEW
WITH SABINE
DAHL NIELSEN

BY DIOGO MESSIAS,
ELHAM RAHMATI
& DARJA ZAITSEV

The relationship between art and public space seems to be an ambivalent one on the contemporary-art scene. On the one hand, Art can be seen as a “human expression”, which creates the possibility of “precious insights” in public spaces. On the other hand, it is increasingly circumscribed by the hegemony of the big institutional players. One solution to this dilemma is to challenge powerful social hierarchies in order to save artists from being trapped between commercialism and state patronage. In that sense, public spaces can be seen as fruitful terrain for artistic research and curatorial strategies. When confronted with critical questions of contemporary politics in a dominant liberal-democratic society, artistic practices in public spaces promote means of possible democratic deliberation, frictions, antagonisms and negotiations that help unpick the structures of convoluted power relations that are turning art into a new counter-culture at a time of raging global capitalism.

In autumn 2014, Sabine Dahl Nielsen, curator and a researcher at Copenhagen University and KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces, visited CuMMA at Aalto University to hold a workshop with students about curating conflictual consensus. In the following conversation she shares her views on how art institutions can function as politically engaged sites of conflict and negotiation.

HOW DO YOU POSITION YOURSELF AS A CURATOR AND A RESEARCHER WITHIN SUCH CONTRADICTIONARY SITUATIONS AS WORKING IN A MUSEUM OF ART IN PUBLIC SPACE?

Working in that context is definitely not a comfort zone. On the other hand, I'd rather call it conflictual than contradictory, and instead of thinking of a street or a public square as an open public space, and of the museum as a closed-off space for a specific group of people, I'd say museums can get involved in art projects that can potentially contribute to the creation of new public spaces.

There are different intensities and different power relations being played out here. The idea of who is included and who is excluded, who has a say, and what kind of power relations are taking place, are all relevant topics, when talking not only about the museum context, but also about streets or public squares. It is a matter thinking of public space as multiple sites that differ from each other. We have to look at them as specific spaces, and look into what kind of power plays are being acted out in their specific contexts.

IF WE CONSIDER THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS IN MANAGING ARCHIVAL KNOWLEDGE, HOW DO YOU THINK CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS ARE WORKING NOWADAYS TO ENGAGE PEOPLE AS "CONSUMERS" OF ART IN PUBLIC SPACES?

I'd say it's very difficult to generalise, and it's important to think of art institutions in a plural sense. There are different kinds of institutions and they work on different premises within different economic or political frameworks. Museums today often function as so-called *postmodern* museums, as the political theorist Chantal Mouffe has termed it, for example as institutions that primarily cater to consumption and work with spectacular exhibition projects to generate a large audience within very limited frameworks. I'd say there's definitely political pressure here that's beginning to be very problematic. At the moment, Western European countries are experiencing large cutbacks and curators are finding it difficult to work within their budgets. But there are still institutions that are experimenting in different ways, rather than going along with this political agenda.

SO IS THE MUSEUM YOU'RE WORKING FOR TRYING TO FIND NEW WAYS TO WORK WITH PEOPLE? WHAT KIND OF STRATEGIES DO YOU USE?

When talking about KØS, there's the same kind of political pressure that other museums face as well, with several agendas being played out at the same time.

Museums have to make sure that people come. Sponsors have economic interests, and people expect to see well-produced exhibitions that are also well-received in the media. So there are all these parameters that a museum has to live up to. At the same time, there are lots of theoretical reflections, debates and discussions going on about the different ways of functioning in museums and art institutions. Also, collective and collaborative activities are being carried out together with non-art agents and institutions, such as language students, youth organizations, migrant organizations etc. So there's definitely an interest in playing an active part in constituting counter-hegemonic publics. It's also important to think of publics as plural, and engaging them not as predefined groups of consumers, but as politically engaged coalitions of critical agents.

HOW CAN WE CONTRIBUTE TO CREATING ZONES AND PRACTICES FOR DEMOCRATIC CONFLICT? WE ARE THINKING OF A CONFLICT THAT CREATES ADVERSARIES RATHER THAN ENEMIES.

That's a big question. I find Chantal Mouffe's theories very interesting, and she is very open towards different kinds of artistic practices. Particularly art projects that generate conflicts and negotiations, accentuating the fact that there are always power plays taking place in different contexts. The Yes Men and Reclaim The Streets can be seen as artistic groups working with these issues, reflecting conflictual and power-related issues in their activist practices.

Chantal Mouffe emphasises that the idea of working in institutional contexts, such as museums, is not something we should stay away from. On the contrary, one can be really productive working from within such contexts. Mouffe makes a distinction between a *strategy of withdrawal* and a *strategy of engagement*, advocating for the latter. However, the way in which such a strategy is employed in specific artistic and curatorial practices can vary. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that there are multiple practices that can be implied and can contribute to the constitution of new counter hegemonic publics.

WHEN THINKING OF CONFLICTUAL SITUATIONS IN POLITICALLY UNSTABLE COUNTRIES, HOW CAN WE PROMOTE THE EMERGENCE OF THOSE WHO ARE BEING SILENCED DUE TO THE DOMINANT CULTURE OF CONSENSUS? HOW DO WE DEAL WITH EXTREME SITUATIONS WHERE THERE ARE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES TO OUR ACTIONS?

I think this is a very important question and I'd like to talk more about the idea of conflict theory. It's not just about exposing conflicts, but also about staging different kinds of negotiations, and acknowledging the fact that other political positions also have a right to fight for their causes. When power dominance is really repressive it becomes very difficult to work, and that's something I'd personally like to go into.

It's very hard to think of these conflicts as something positive, but it's also important not to think of power as something evil per se – it can also be generative. When trying to restructure power relations it is, in my opinion, important not only to look towards the centre of power and to respond directly whenever political agendas are being played out, but also to try to formulate questions that actively debate the dominant discourses. Looking to the sides and trying to find different directions and entry points is something that could be explored further.

COMING FROM WHAT WE MIGHT CALL A PRIVILEGED POSITION AND BACKGROUND, WHAT IS YOUR MOTIVATION FOR RESEARCHING AND ACTING WITHIN A FRAMEWORK OF DEMOCRATIC RADICALISATION THAT ACTUALLY AIMS TO DESTABILISE CURRENT POWER STRUCTURES AND HIERARCHIES?

I'm in this for several reasons. On the one hand, one might say that we live in a privileged welfare state, but, of course, these well-functioning systems have problems and conflicts as well. It has become important for me to highlight these conflicts in today's capitalist discourse. Societal transformations are inevitable, but due to the financial crisis we have to face lots of cutbacks, political restrictions and censorship. I think this is one of the reasons why I'm working with conflict areas. We find ourselves in politically instigated situations that also have to be worked through in a political way. In this sense, art and curatorial projects can be highly helpful. They can highlight the important issues and make political questions and power claims relevant. One has to think of them as something that can help to get people passionately engage in political questioning.

DO YOU AGREE WITH THE HYPOTHESIS THAT CLAIMS THAT ART HAS LOST ITS CRITICALITY AS A RESULT OF BEING NEUTRALISED AND RECUPERATED BY CAPITALISM? IF YES, THEN TAKING AN AGONISTIC APPROACH, HOW CAN WE AS ARTISTS AND CURATORS RESIST THIS?

I think the idea of art being recuperated and used for capitalist consumerism sometimes makes it difficult to work in this context, but I also want to think of this more as a challenge. Repositioning ourselves and not always thinking towards the centres of power is something that Chantal Mouffe suggests. Always relocating, reformulating agendas and producing counter-hegemonic publics and models is the most efficient way of working through these conflicts and negotiations.

SABINE DAHL NIELSEN is a researcher, writer, teacher and a curator currently based in Copenhagen, Denmark. She is also editor of the Danish photo magazine *Filter* and writes regularly for the Scandinavian architecture magazine *Arkitekten*. In her PhD project recently carried out at Copenhagen University and KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces, Nielsen presented an examination of contemporary art and its role in shaping public spaces. The project was titled *Art in Public Spaces: Conflicts and Negotiations as Critical Urban Practices*.

DIOGO MESSIAS is an MA student in VICCA (Visual Culture and Contemporary Art) at Aalto University. His research comprises alternative educational strategies within cultural institutions. He has worked as a cultural mediator at the Oscar Niemeyer Museum in Brazil, and as a teacher of Consciousness-based education at David Lynch Foundation.

ELHAM RAHMATI is an MA student in Visual Arts at Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze, and currently an exchange student on the VICCA programme. She has been working with political and social issues within totalitarianism in the Middle East, focusing mainly on gender-inequality issues.

DARJA ZAITSEV has an MA in Clothing Design from the University of Lapland (2012). Her thesis concerned masculinity, gender representations and menswear. She has been working as a curator and researcher in different museums and her own K6A6 hallway gallery. She is now pursuing an MA at CuMMA, where her interests lie in underground-art activities, online phenomena and organising multi-disciplinary events bringing together people from different fields of life.

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*The Way Out -
Zones for Democratic Conflict
Interview with
Sabine Dahl Nielsen
by Diogo Messias,
Elham Rahmati
and Darja Zaitsev*

EDITORS

Nora Sternfeld
and Henna Harri

EDITORIAL WORK

Diogo Messias,
Elham Rahmati
and Darja Zaitsev

PROOFREADING

Mike Garner

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Laura Kokkonen

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