

## CUMMA PAPERS #15

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.

# INTERVENTIONS IN HISTORY POLITICS AS ARTISTIC STRATEGY AN INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN KRENN

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Martin Krenn is an artist, curator and lecturer at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, Austria. In his work he examines and discusses sociopolitical topics. One of his key questions regarding his practice relates to the possibility of political participation in our neoliberal world. In October 2014, he gave a lecture and held a workshop with CuMMA (Curating, Managing and Mediating Art) students at Aalto University, as part of the Theoretical Frameworks of Curating and Mediating Art seminar. In his lecture, Krenn gave insights into his own artistic practice and collaborative projects, each of which puts forward a different strategy for intervening in the politics of history. His interest in 'blank spots' in official history writing is one of his methods for triggering debate about the hidden parts of history. After the lecture, we got together with Krenn to discuss the meaning of contested history, the role of the artist, and the future of politically and socially engaged art.

YOU TALK ABOUT 'BLANK SPOTS' IN THE OFFICIAL WRITING OF HISTORY. HOW DO YOU SELECT THE BLANK SPOTS THAT YOU WANT TO SEARCH FOR IN YOUR OWN PRACTICE, AND WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE AND EFFECT OF REVEALING UNSPOKEN FACTS IN EVERYDAY LIFE?

Well, in the process of preparing this talk at Aalto University, "blank spot" turned out to be a difficult term to use in the title – as it might give the impression of a space that is "outside" of history, and not part of the existing power relations. Nora Sternfeld and I finally decided to choose the term *contested histories* because the official history of a place is always contested. Usually, the official version of a country's history contains numerous contradictions, and for me, history politics starts to be interesting here. That's why my work is not only about revealing hidden historical facts, it also demands awareness of already stated facts that are deliberately neglected or excluded by official history politics. This is a dialectic in an ongoing debate about forgetting and remembering. For me, forgetting something is a kind of passive act – it just happens to you, unintentionally. My understanding of history politics is much more active. It is the struggle to form an identity. This may affect a smaller group, for example, an ethnic or political group, or a larger group, such as the whole population of a country. From this perspective it becomes clear that history politics is not so much related to the phenomenon of just *forgetting what once happened*, it is an *active act of remembering as well as of excluding the remembrance* of certain historical events.

Of course, history is full of *blank spots*, in the sense of events from the past that the majority of people are not aware of. Such *blank spots* can be addressed by an artistic investigation in order to trigger a debate about history politics in a more general way. For example, the history of the *Riesenrad* (Giant Wheel) in Vienna is one such *blank spot*. Although it is one of the city's most visible landmarks, nearly no one knows that it was actually "Aryanised" in 1938. Pointing within an art project to such "lost" knowledge can trigger a debate about "Aryanisation", and raise awareness of the restitution that was prevented more generally in Austria after 1945.<sup>1</sup> But it is not always necessary to point to *blank spots* in history. I think it depends on the situation, the subject, the strategy, and what you want to address as an artist.

<sup>1</sup> "Monument of the "Aryanisation" (2005–2008)", Martin Krenn, [http://www.martinkrenn.net/?page\\_id=442](http://www.martinkrenn.net/?page_id=442)

## SO YOU TRY TO GENERATE A DISCUSSION ABOUT AN EXISTING FACT?

Yes, I try to trigger such a debate (often within a group) with artistic means. Especially when facts have been excluded from official commemoration, they can then become a highly political issue that is sometimes even followed by actual change, for example, a plaque has to be changed or a street has to be renamed. This is one part of my artistic practice. The other part is to involve myself in projects that deal with history politics so as to empower people: examples include a group called Black Women's Community, a gay group and a group that fights anti-Semitism and historical revisionism. These kinds of alliances empower us all to learn from each other and to fight various types of discrimination.

## IN ALMOST ALL OF YOUR WORKS YOU DEAL WITH THE IDEA OF ALIENATION AND RESISTANCE. THE IDEA OF ALIENATION OFTEN REFERS TO SOMEBODY WHO IS PUT ON THE OUTSIDE AND ROBBED OF THEIR OWN RIGHTS. WHY DO YOU WORK ON THIS TOPIC AND WHAT RESPONSES DOES THIS IDEA OF ALIENATION AROUSE?

This is an interesting question. It's interesting that you combine the term alienation with forms of exclusion, as far as I understood it. Is that correct?

### YES, DON'T YOU THINK THEY ARE SOMEHOW CONNECTED?

Yes, I think so, but it's interesting that you talk about it in that way, because the concept of alienation is generally the idea that there is another reality beyond the reality that is produced by capitalism. In this Marxist context one would speak of social alienation and the alienation of work. The artist could be the person who reveals these forms of alienation and shows how they structure our society. But in this understanding, there's a difficulty: it would mean that the artist is someone who

knows better than the others. It's important to realise that the artist is no less affected by alienation than everyone else.

Since the avant-garde movement at the beginning of the 20th century, there's a notion of the artist standing outside of society, as if the artist was some kind of *super-conscious human being* who is able to know the real truth behind things. This is a quite problematic notion of the artist.

A completely different form of alienation could be seen in the strategic exclusion of immigrants and refugees from and within wealthy countries (as if there was one *we* on one side and many *aliens* on the other side). This is common politics. In Austria, for example, today, nearly everyone knows in precise detail about the horrible situation in deportation

prisons, as well as at border crossings. Everyone in Europe is informed about these scenarios, but at the same time, there is an increasing public unawareness and disinterest. The more refugees are dying because they are trying to cross the European border, the less it seems to be reported in the media. As an artist you don't need to tell the public the truth about these forms of institutional racism. It is not a blank spot anymore. Everyone already knows it. Nevertheless, racism and exclusion continue.

### SO WHAT CAN AN ARTIST DO ABOUT THIS SITUATION WHEN EVERYBODY KNOWS THE TRUTH?

In this case and in many others cases, an artist can't just tell the truth to the public. The public is well educated and people inform themselves not only through the mass media, but also through the numerous news channels on the internet. It's not so easy to generalise, but if you want to politicise certain discourses, then nowadays, more so than before the rise of the internet, it is becoming significantly more important to find strategies for resisting and subverting the power mechanisms of the neoliberal infotainment culture.

For me, one possibility for countering this logic is to dig deeper into a subject by collaborating with other people. This collaboration can result in a form of *mutual empowerment*. When artists *empower* a certain group by giving them a voice, then in most cases the group will also empower the artists, for example by critiquing their work. It is also important to develop as well as to show the artworks in contexts beyond the art world, or to invite people into a museum and to try to generate an interesting social or political situation in such an art institution.

### SO HOW THEN WOULD YOU DEFINE PARTICIPATION IN YOUR PROJECTS?

First, I would like to distinguish between a participatory art practice and participation in art, as defined by the German theoretician Silke Feldhoff. Participation is related to an artistic practice which enables people to take part in a project in a way that is comparable to interactive media art in the late 1980s. An example of this type of interactive art is the idea of spectators finding themselves in a room containing an art installation and pressing some buttons in order to change the artwork. A non-media project based on participation would not be so technical, but in its essence could be compared to interactive art as described. The audience is involved in a project with a set framework. The spectator cannot change this framework, they can only contribute to the project according to the rules of the artist. In a participatory art project, the artist also suggests a framework, but discusses this with participants and stays open to change. The artist introduces ideas into the project, but participants can question and bring in their own ideas. If we follow

this definition of participatory art, then we can see it contains emancipatory potential. The main difference between participatory art and collaborative art is agency. The artist is always responsible for the whole project in participatory art, whereas in collaborative art the gap between the artist and other participants becomes blurred. Everyone in a collaborative project should feel responsible for the project. So, despite the differences in methodology and terminology, it would be wrong to generalise and classify them as good or bad practices. I think it's important to look at the individual project and, after critical analysis, one can decide if the right method has been chosen and if it was well carried out.

I'm really sceptical about a project that is based on participation in which the spectator has nothing to say. For example, there is a gathering of one thousand naked people and the artist Spencer Tunick takes a photo. They all participate in his work, but their participation is really limited. Unfortunately, all these terms are often mixed up in the art discourse, and there's no clear definition of them. In my opinion, these terms are very important and one has to be able to differentiate between them.

#### IN THIS CONTEXT DO YOU DEFINE YOURSELF AS AN ARTIST WHO DOES PARTICIPATORY PROJECTS?

It depends on the project. I mainly work collaboratively, but I have also realised several participatory projects.

#### YOU OFTEN COLLABORATE WITH OTHER ARTISTS AND RESEARCHERS ON DIFFERENT PROJECTS. WHAT INTERESTS YOU IN THESE KINDS OF COLLABORATIVE WORKS, AND WHAT IS YOUR STRATEGY FOR FORMING ALLIANCES?

Often, it just happens. Someone asks me to contribute something and then I suddenly become a part of an alliance. I talk with friends and colleagues, and we have an idea that we can do together. This leads to different forms of collaborative work. These forms of collaboration are quite easy compared to the development and realisation of a participatory art project. In collaborative work, especially when there are only a few of us, we just sit together and discuss ideas we have, and what we want to do. We may sometimes have different opinions, but these differences make the collaboration even more interesting. It becomes more difficult when collaborating with many people. I personally rarely involve myself in projects with more than ten collaborators and, if I do, I am only partly involved and try to avoid taking part in the organisation. Although I know there are various interesting methods that enable such groups to be self-governed. One possibility

is to have a rotation principle—a few people lead the group for a period of time and are permitted to make decisions, but are replaced by others after their period is over. In the end, everyone should have been in a leading position at least once. This is something that Margit Czenki, one of the founders of the project *Park Fiction* in Hamburg, told me. It's a rotation principle that works quite well in left-wing autonomous groups. This could also be a good method for giving everyone a chance to speak. Sometimes when there are more than fifteen people, only the ideas and proposals of the ones who always talk are heard. The more silent members of the group have no possibility of playing an active part, because they have different communication skills. So it takes different methods and strategies to make that possible. I myself have collaborated mainly with other artists, historians or people from universities. Most of them already had their own structure for organising a group. One example is the project *Statt Rassismus (instead of Racism)* in cooperation with the Institute of Educational Sciences at the University of Innsbruck, in which we developed participatory tools based on our experiences.<sup>2</sup>

## HOW DO YOU WORK WITH PEOPLE WHO SEEM TO HAVE A DIFFERENT MINDSET?

Well, I cannot collaborate with people who have a completely different mindset. Although sometimes it seems that I have to, especially if there is a strategic goal in the project! I try to avoid that in most of my art projects. Of course, it depends on the situation—in a participatory setting it could be very interesting working with completely different ideas and opinions. For me, collaboration really differs from participation. Collaboration is often based on friendship, and you only can be friends with someone with a similar mindset, otherwise it becomes really difficult. I couldn't work collaboratively with someone who has a fascist background, for example!

<sup>2</sup> *Statt Rassismus* (2010), Martin Krenn in cooperation with the Institute of Pedagogy of the University of Innsbruck (Dr. Claus Melter and Selda Sevgi) [http://www.martinkrenn.net/?page\\_id=1418](http://www.martinkrenn.net/?page_id=1418)

IN A LOT OF YOUR WORKS, LIKE THE CHOI YUEN VILLAGE PROJECT IN HONG KONG, YOU ENTER A DISCUSSION IN AN AREA FAR FROM WHERE YOU HAVE LIVED. HOW DO YOU NOT GET LOST IN TRANSLATION AND OVERCOME THE LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DIFFERENT SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS THAT YOU HAVE AS AN OUTSIDER?

*Choi Yuen Village* is a project that was realised within the framework of the long-term project *In Between the Movements*. This is a video project that looks at the networking taking place between local and global justice movements. It investigates corresponding practices and their influence on theory. During my stay in Hong Kong, I had a chance to get in contact with local activists, who offered me a guided tour of a small village, one of many agricultural villages established in the new territories of Hong Kong by mainland immigrants in the 1950s and '60s. They told me the government wants to destroy the village in 2010 to make way for a new rail line. I filmed their weekly guided tour and interviewed village and Hong Kong activists. I was fascinated by the special forms of resistance that they have established. This was a kind of alliance that illustrated how artists and activists from a metropolis such as Hong Kong could work together with peasants from a small village, who were normally not politically active. The inhabitants finally transformed their whole village into a place of protest. That's why I decided to make a small photo series about the protest sign boards that were all around the village, mounted on their small houses and huts. Some of these sign boards were also in English—they were meant to raise the awareness of tourists and international journalists. The video as well as the photo series were also used by the activists and locals in several contexts. Both were shown in different exhibitions because it was important to show these strategies of art and activism. In the video some of the activists tell me that their activities were influenced by global justice movements from other countries. Unfortunately, although their campaign reached the public very successfully and pushed through several smaller demands, they couldn't stop the demolition of Choi Yuen Village. However, I think their method for forming such an alliance was really successful. Their campaign was innovatively structured and very democratic. As these strategies and methods are often forgotten, I think the job of an artist can be to document these kinds of events, campaigns and group compositions, and through artistic documentation contribute to the "global archive of activism".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Choi Yuen Village 2009, Martin Krenn with the support of the Choi Yuen Villagers, Hong Kong, September 2009: [http://www.martinkrenn.net/choi\\_yuen\\_village](http://www.martinkrenn.net/choi_yuen_village) and [http://www.martinkrenn.net/?attachment\\_id=1293](http://www.martinkrenn.net/?attachment_id=1293)

## WHAT LED YOU TO WORK ON HISTORY POLITICS AND TO MAKING INTERVENTIONS IN MONUMENTS THROUGH ARTISTIC PRACTICE?

The topic of history politics became important in 2001, when I realised the project *Restitution* together with Wolfram Kastner and the students of the summer academy in Salzburg.<sup>4</sup> The project dealt with the Nazi past in Austria. We made several interventions in public space, raising awareness of stolen and concealed Jewish property in the so-called festival town of Salzburg. A series of unauthorised plaques were placed at several locations in Salzburg to highlight the 'Aryanisation' of Jewish businesses and households in 1938, and the lack of any form of restitution after 1945. Additionally we installed a restitution point in Galerie 5020 in Salzburg. In this context, I started to think in-depth about the role of monuments in society.

<sup>4</sup> Rückgabe/Restitution (2001) Legitimacy in appearance: Robbery without Restitution Martin Krenn, Wolfram Kastner and students from the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts [http://www.martinkrenn.net/?page\\_id=642](http://www.martinkrenn.net/?page_id=642)

## HOW DO YOU SEE THE ROLE OF MONUMENTS IN OUR SOCIETY TODAY AND WHAT IS THEIR ROLE IN HISTORY POLITICS?

Most monuments are symbols of national myths. These monuments are problematic, however, they can also fulfil an important and positive role for remembrance. We should consider the time in which monuments were built. Most of the old monuments are somehow time-worn, but through intervention they can eventually take on a new meaning, and even raise awareness of a neglected part of history. This was the main idea behind our project for redesigning the Lueger monument.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Open Call to transform the Karl Lueger statue into a monument against anti-Semitism and racism in Austria. Students project, realised in the context of the seminar "Interventions" by Martin Krenn, University of Applied Arts, Vienna, 2008–20012 [http://www.martinkrenn.net/?page\\_id=1243](http://www.martinkrenn.net/?page_id=1243)

MANY OF YOUR PROJECTS ARE RELATED TO AND HAPPEN IN PUBLIC SPACE, BUT WHAT ABOUT INSTITUTIONAL SPACE? WHAT POSSIBILITY IS THERE FOR INTERVENING IN A MUSEUM SPACE OR A WHITE CUBE? HOW DOES THE EXHIBITION SPACE AND THE DISPLAY CONTEXT AFFECT THE WAY YOUR WORK COMMUNICATES WITH THE AUDIENCE?

I think it really depends on the place and the audience, as well as on the museum. As I haven't curated for quite a while, I am not so familiar with the latest interventionist concepts for politicising museums. But nevertheless, I think it's not as complicated as it seems. I believe that if people want to politicise a space —no matter if this is a museum, university or a private art gallery— they will find a way. There are helpful theoretical concepts, but in the end one is confronted with the specific reality of one particular space. This reality is only temporary and can be changed by a person, but it will also change by itself.

The concept of the *white cube* makes us believe that there is a situation that is the same everywhere, but *white cubes* differ greatly from each other. Depending on their surroundings, they fulfil different functions and support many different ideas. Nevertheless, in my participatory projects it's the audience more than the institution that influences how my works communicate with the space. No matter how and where a project is set up, it becomes political as soon as it enables people to organise something in solidarity with others in order to target injustice. This process can be triggered inside a *white cube*, but I prefer to do it outside.

DOES SHOWING DOCUMENTATION OF A PUBLIC-SPACE WORK IN A WHITE CUBE CHANGE THE WORK?

I rarely do that. I only present this type of docu-art in a special context when it really fits into the curatorial concept of the show. Usually, my artworks and projects are either conceptualised for public space or for a gallery. I think this is important, because you find different audiences in art spaces compared to public squares or streets. I also try to realise projects that happen concurrently in public space and the gallery. One example is *Learned Homeland*, carried out in cooperation with Oliver Ressler in 1996. The project consisted of a billboard in public space, as well as an exhibition in the Neue Galerie at the Landesmuseum, Graz.<sup>6</sup> The project attempted to illustrate the “nativising strategies” of Austrian school books, in which the construction of homeland is particularly vivid. In the

<sup>6</sup> *Learned Homeland* (1996), Martin Krenn and Oliver Ressler, Billboard object in public space, exhibition in the Neue Galerie im Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz (A) [http://www.martinkrenn.net/?page\\_id=764](http://www.martinkrenn.net/?page_id=764)

process of creating collective identities through the concept of homeland, "your own" is always valued against "the other", and in this way demarcated from it. "Your own" history is glorified or even falsified. The idea of the project was to show only two single school-book pages that served as perfect examples of the construction of national feelings and how these were taught in school. We blew the pages up and presented them as a large three-sided "Poster Object" on the main square in Graz. One can imagine that these posters provoked many reactions. People remembered their own school days. We also invited passers-by to visit our exhibition, in which further examples of school-book pages and video interviews about the construction of national identity were presented. So this is one example of how I try to address different audiences and invite people to a show who wouldn't usually visit a museum.

### DO YOU BELIEVE ART AS SOCIAL INTERVENTION IS A TREND NOWADAYS, AND WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THIS KIND OF PRACTICE?

I am wondering if it really is a huge trend. It seems to me that it was a bigger trend in the mid '90s. Back then, many projects were focusing on social collaboration between different audiences and artists, and this was happening in art spaces as well as in public. Moreover, new art theories, such as relational aesthetics as coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, were very popular. Maybe nowadays there is a trend for these kinds of social practices to become more political. I think one reason for this is the new protest culture and the formation of a *global justice movement* in the first decade of the 21st century, and the Occupy movement, which started around 2010. Nowadays, we have a different idea of civil society and the public in general. At the same time, neoliberalism is becoming stronger and the neoliberal concept of a market-driven society is becoming more influential. Perhaps some of the more radical political art interventions get more attention in the art world than they would have in the 1990s.

No matter if it is trendy or not, I think there is a future for political and social art, because this art practice has special possibilities that you cannot find in just any type of activist practice. Secondly, I think that art always poses questions and even questions itself, which opens up a special self-reflective space that is quite unique in the field of political and social engagement. Thirdly, one should not underestimate the role of aesthetics, which can lead to new methods of protest as well as to new forms of organisation and dialogue.

IF WE SEE SOCIALLY AND POLITICALLY ENGAGED ART AS A TREND, AS EVIDENCED BY THE OPEN CALLS AND BIENNALES RELATED TO THIS FIELD, CAN IT THEN BE PART OF A NEOLIBERAL STRATEGY OF MAKING CRITICISM PART OF THE SYSTEM?

I think one has to be critical about the increasing number of open calls in the art world, and one has to be careful to see if the particular biennale or festival really supports the arts, and not primarily other interests, such as those of the tourism industry. Again, it depends on the context and the people. If the ambition is to support social, public art and a critical political art practice, then an open call or a biennial may be the right tools. A danger with festivals on a larger scale is that combining as many different critical and political positions as possible doesn't necessarily produce a more powerful political outcome. On the contrary, too many positions can result in arbitrariness and lack of political commitment. Even in this scenario one can strategically use the demand for social and political art to realise an interesting art project that can produce an effect beyond the context of a festival or biennale.

MARTIN KRENN lives and works in Vienna and Belfast, and has carried out art projects at the interface between art and sociopolitical topics. He teaches Interventionist Art in the Dept. of Art and Communication Practices - KKP at the University of Applied Arts Vienna (AT). In 2011, Krenn was awarded a Vice-Chancellor's Research Scholarship at the University of Ulster in Belfast (UK). Since then, he has been a PhD researcher at the University's Faculty of Art, Design and the Built Environment. Together with Andrea Domesle he curated the exhibition tour "On the Tectonics of History". This show travelled around Europe and had its last stop in New York at the ISCP. The exhibition exposes the historical traces of the Nazi era of the 1930s and 1940s, and reflects on how present-day society deals with this time period. From 2006 to 2009, Krenn served as chairperson of the Austrian Artists Association (IG Bildende Kunst).

Krenn has had numerous international exhibitions, including solo shows in Graz (Neue Galerie), Vienna (Kunsthalle Exnergasse and Passagegalerie Künstlerhaus), Salzburg (Salzburger Kunstverein and Galerie 5020), Brest (Centre d'art Passerelle), Lüneburg (Kunstraum Lüneburg), München (Kunstraum München), Ljubljana (Mala galerija Cankarjev Dom), Celje (Center for Contemporary Art) and Bucharest (Centre for Visual Introspection). He has participated in group shows, e.g. in Paris (Apegac/ Espace Donguy), Antwerpen (NICC), Amsterdam (W139), Kobe (Videoart Center Tokyo), Berlin (NGBK), Helsingborg (Dunkers Kulturhus), Hong Kong (Hong Kong Art Center), Leipzig (Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst), Toronto (Toronto Free Gallery), Vancouver (Artspeak Gallery), Holon (The Israeli Center for Digital Art), Thun (Kunstmuseum Thun), Pori (Pori Art Museum), and Sibiu (The National Brukenthal Museum). His work is represented by Galerie Zimmermann Kratochwill, Graz. [www.martinkrenn.net](http://www.martinkrenn.net)

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**SOKO HWANG** has studied Aalto University's MA Programme of Applied Art and Design (with a minor in Art in Context) since 2012. He is currently researching how an individual's identity is formed and controlled by relationships, in addition to questioning marginalised subjectivities through enacting performative works in everyday contexts.

**SUSANNE MIERZWIAK** is studying photography at Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen, Germany. Currently, she is on an exchange semester in Helsinki. She is taking part in the MA course in Curating, Managing and Mediating Art at Aalto University. In her artistic practice, she is interested in changing and finding new meanings for existing photographic material.

**PIIA OKSANEN** has an MA in Art History from the University of Helsinki. She has worked in contemporary art at Galerie Anhava, IHME Contemporary Art Festival, and EMMA Espoo Museum of Modern Art, and elsewhere. She began her studies in Curating, Mediating and Managing Art at Aalto University in 2014. Her latest curatorial work is the PROJECT series at Galerie Anhava. At the moment, she is especially interested in the institutional framework of contemporary art, and in exploring the existing realities and their possible futures.

#### CuMMA PAPERS #15

*Interventions in History Politics  
as Artistic Strategy  
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